

Quiet Dreams of You and I

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/26196955) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/26196955>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Video Blogging RPF
Relationship:	Clay Dream & GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Minor or Background Relationship(s) , Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Original Characters , Original Female Character(s) , Original Male Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Mutual Pining , Slow Burn , Friends to Lovers , Fake/Pretend Relationship , Angst , like proper slowburn , these fools ain't making contact before at least 50k , Beta Read , Smut , author is bad at chapter titles , Oral Sex , but it's only imagined , References to Heterosexual sex , only putting that tag in cos its funny asf , Masturbation , Other Additional Tags to Be Added
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-08-30 Updated: 2022-01-10 Chapters: 12/? Words: 56727

Quiet Dreams of You and I

by [LolaLikes](#)

Summary

Clay's life begins to unravel when he wakes up one morning to a text from his ex-girlfriend and she is flung back into his life with a holiday to Bali. Armoured with a fake relationship and the support of his best friend, he initially believes he can handle the reunion. But as the tropical nights march on, and the feelings of his past create complications, Clay is forced to reconcile with all that he's buried. Meanwhile, unbidden, a new source of love blossoms, ready to tear him apart.

Early Morning Messages and Rash Decisions

Chapter Notes

Now lads when I say slow burn I mean sloooww, it may take a while to get going but please stick with me. I've been sitting on this idea for quite a while, it's basically a combination of all my favourite tropes and I'm really happy with my plan and future chapter drafts. All feedback is welcome & hope y'all enjoy!

**future Lola returning for editing purposes- updates are very slow on this bad boy, so if u ain't a fan of that 🐉.

Also, my writing style does shift throughout this fic, due to the expanse of time it was written over. The early chapters aren't terrible, but there is an uptake in quality, so I hope that offers u some hope**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was the sunlight that woke him. A single slice of gold that crept through the crack in the curtains, settling over Clay's closed eyes and letting him know it was morning. Clay shifted, then stretched, luxurious and slow, revelling in the comfort of his bed and the warmth of the new day. He'd gone to sleep early the night before so it was unusually easy to shake off the last dregs of sleep. With a slow sigh, Clay settled back down into his bed. Being awake and being actively out of bed and doing things were two very different states of being, and he intended to remain in the former state for as long as humanly possible. Clay reached out a clumsy arm to his bedside table, fumbling for his phone. The great thing about being an "influencer" is that you could spend an hour on Twitter every morning and call it work.

For just a moment more Clay lingered in the comfort of the morning, before unlocking his phone. With a slight frown, he realised he had a text. That was odd, no one ever texted him, not even that many people had his number. He opened up his messages, brow furrowing in intrigue before his eyes widened in shock and disbelief. *What the hell*. Part of Clay couldn't believe it, but there it was. A message from Hannah. Sent at around five in the morning. With growing trepidation, Clay opened the message.

Hannah: Hey Clay, ik it's been a while and I'm sorry to message you like this. I just thought I'd let you know that the trip we all booked a while back is coming up in a month and some stuff has happened around it. I understand completely if you don't care abt it anymore, you can totally ignore this message if you want, but I felt like I had to pass on the news anyway.

"Shit." Clay released the expletive like it was a breath he'd been holding in. That stupid fucking trip. Around ten months ago, Clay and his former girlfriend, Hannah, had booked a holiday, to Bali of all places. They'd planned meticulously, scouting out the cheapest flight season, booking months in advance for the maximum discounts. It had always been a dream of his, a romantic

getaway to some beautiful tropical location, and he'd fallen in love with Bali, set his heart on the damn trip. The plan was to go with four of their friends. Six people, all couples sharing a house together for four weeks. In fucking Bali. It'd all been so perfect. Until of course, Hannah had- Clay stopped, mid-thought. It still hurt to think about, even now. Letting out an irritated huff, he looked back down at Hannah's message, forcing himself to read on.

Hannah: Basically, Mel and Jack have split up and don't want to/can't afford to go on it anymore. However, Anaya and Scott are still together and really looking forward to it. This means that there are 2 extra spaces on the trip. I have a person in mind I would like to bring and if you also have a plus one you'd like to bring, it means the trip can still happen. If you don't want to come, which I completely understand, I can ask around and see if I can find someone to take your space, and then they can pay you back for the cost of the trip, and Jack and Mel can also get a proper refund. If I can't find anyone then you won't be able to get any compensation as it's obviously way too late to get a refund for the house. Sorry to spring this all on you, but I would appreciate it if you could get back to me on this. Thanks, Hannah.

Clay let out a long pained sigh. *What the fuck I am gonna do about this?* He thought to himself. He hadn't *forgotten* about the trip, just pushed it to the back of his mind and ignored it. He rolled onto his back again, letting the phone in his hands fall to his chest. "What the hell am I gonna do?" He thought aloud, breaking the sleepy silence of his room. He flipped his phone back over and opened up Discord, fingers dancing over his screen as he typed out a message.

dream: Are you up?

dream: I need to talk to you abt something

Clay tapped his phone against his chest, impatiently waiting for an answer. Surprisingly quickly he felt a buzz.

Sapnap: bro i just woke up

dream: Please

dream: Can I call you??

A moment later, Nick started a video call, Clay hastily accepted it, feeling a small jolt of relief as he did so.

"What is it, man?" Nick asked as the call started up. He was still in bed, his hair a ruffled mess and the baggy shirt he wore to sleep crumpled around his neck.

"It's probably easier to just show you," Clay said, bringing the text back up to screenshot it. "Basically Hannah messaged me like super early this morning."

Nick hissed quietly under his breath.

"It's nothing *bad*," Clay said. "I guess it is kinda bad actually. I'm sending you a screenshot now."

"Ugh," Nick grumbled. "I'm too tired to *read*."

"You'd say that even if you'd been up for hours." Clay softened his voice. "Please. I really need your help on this one."

Nick grumbled again, but Clay could already see his eyes flicking across the screen, reading through the message.

Clay let his head fall, looking away from his phone while Nick read through the message, he really hoped Nick could help him figure this one out, otherwise, he didn't know what the hell he was going to do. He heard Nick let out a long breath and looked back up at the screen.

"Okay, what the *fuck* is this?"

Clay sighed, "I know."

"So who's Mel and Jack? And who are the other two?"

"Mel, Jack, Scott and Anaya are friends of ours." Clay explained, "We booked the trip with them as obviously it's cheaper if you go as a group."

"But now Mel and Jack aren't coming," Nick said slowly. "Or they can't or whatever."

"Yeh, after we split she was probably just thinking of replacing me for the trip, then maybe paying me back later. I guess Mel and Jack really complicated things."

Nick nodded slowly. "Or maybe she was still expecting you to go anyway like it just go-ahead like nothing happened."

"No way!" Clay scoffed. "Last time we met I probably looked like I wanted to kill her."

"Yeh, but would she really just push you out of your own vacation?" Nick asked, "I remember you telling me about it, way back, and you put so much time into it, you cared about it so much."

Clay sighed, leaning back on his pillow, "I wouldn't put it past her. Besides, the house was all booked in her name." He chewed his lip, considering the situation. "I guess I should be happy she's even telling me what's been happening now."

"Did you ever actually tell her you didn't want to go?" Nick asked.

Clay chuckled darkly, "I mean I probably screamed it her way at some point." He paused, musing on the thought. "Thinking about it though she *might've* thought we were still going ahead as planned. There's an extra room in the house I could've stayed in. We should've really talked about it sooner I guess, but I didn't think to. Didn't really think about the trip at all." That was a lie. He'd thought about it obsessively after he and Hannah had first broken up. Nick probably recognised the untruth but didn't mention it.

“When was the last time you talked to all these people? Your friends. Why didn’t they let you know about this sooner?”

“Mel was more Hannah's friend, not mine. I kinda cut off contact with the lot of them after I broke up with Hannah.” Clay thought about it briefly. “I guess Scott and I were close. Maybe he just didn’t want to interfere.”

“Okay.” Nick drew out the word, deep in thought “How much was the trip then?”

“One thousand two hundred and something. Plus a deposit.”

“God, I wish I could just give away a thousand dollars.”

“I didn’t give it away.” Clay said defensively. “It’s complicated. And besides, I knew she wouldn’t have had the money to pay me, even if I’d asked for it back or something.”

“It’s okay man, I know, I was just joking.”

“I know, I know.” Clay reassured him with a half-smile, “I’m just wound up about the whole thing, to be honest.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

Clay fell silent, thinking. On the one hand, he resented Hannah. Despised her. Nothing seemed more unbearable than being stuck in a house with her for a month. On the other hand, he had already paid for that trip. The whole thing had been his idea and he had been looking forward to it for so long. He loved Bali, and he’d been missing Scott and Anaya as well. He’d feel wrong if he just let them down, they’d been looking forward to the trip as well. Besides, he could bring someone along with him. Clay thought on it for a moment more before his eyes hardened. Resolve set, he decided. “I’m fucking going.”

“Hell yeah!” Nick grinned at him.

“Fuck Hannah. Fuck her. I wanted this for so long, and I’m literally letting her hurt me all over again if I don’t go.” Clay felt angry, angry like he hadn’t felt in a long time. “I’m going.”

“Hell yeah, you are.” Nick laughed, face breaking out into another grin. “Screw Hannah!”

“And you’re coming with me.”

“What?” Nick’s face fell.

“There are two spaces, remember.” Clay smiled at Nick. “It’d be awesome if we went together.”

“I can’t go, man.”

“Why not?” Clay asked.

“Dream. I *can’t*” Nick Implored him. “Where the hell am I even gonna get a thousand dollars from for a start.”

“I’ll pay for you.” Clay said, voice firm.

“What? Dream, Clay, you can’t *do* that.”

“Yes, I can. I’ve literally got the money, and you’d be doing me a massive favour.”

“You’ve done more than enough for me already.” Nick’s voice was rising. “You can’t just give me a free trip to goddamn Bali!”

“You’re my best friend Nick.” Clay looked at him, eyes serious. “I need you there.”

Nick groaned. He held a hand to his forehead as though nursing a crippling headache. “Why did you even book the stupid trip with stupid Hannah in the first place?”

“Because, *Sapnap*, ” Clay hissed through his teeth, “At the time I thought we were doing great. And I mean, we were!” He protested, his voice rising with indignance. “I had no clue she was cheating on me. None at all! Obviously now with the benefit of hindsight, I wouldn’t have booked the stupid fucking trip.”

“God.” Nick sighed.

“What?” Clay asked, running a hand through his hair, a little self-conscious after his outburst.

“You’re a broken man Dream.” Nick smiled gently. “Now I have to say yes, out of pity more than anything.”

“Yes!” Clay punched the air. “I knew I could count on you!”

Nick grinned. “Who knows, it might not even be that bad.”

“It’ll be awesome, I promise, I’ll make sure you have fun.” Clay grinned back. “Thank you so much, I owe you one.”

“Not really, I am getting a free holiday to Bali remember.”

Clay shrugged. “That’s pocket change for me.” He said with a smirk.

“You ass.” Nick laughed. “Bro this is actually crazy.”

“I know!” Clay felt elated. He wasn’t going to let Hannah screw him over again. He was going on that trip and it was going to be the best damn month of his life. It might even be good seeing Hannah again, might help him get over her, now that he had a friend by his side.

Nick pursed his lips, brow furrowed. “What about George though?” He asked.

“What about him?”

“Why not ask him to come with you?”

“Because I wanted to ask you, Sap.” Clay looked down, away from the screen. “I’ve known you longer, and I guess I just wouldn’t feel comfortable asking that of him. Like, he’d either have to get a Visa to fly out to America, or just meet me straight in Bali. Besides, he’s always talking about how he wants to spend more time with his friends and family, I can’t just ask him to leave all of them for a whole month.” He looked back at his phone, why did he feel such a strong need to justify this? “I just wanna go with you.”

“Hey, thanks. That really means a lot. I’m happy to be there for you” Nick smiled at Clay, warmth in his eyes. “I just don’t want him to feel left out, that’s all.”

Clay sighed. "I get you, I suppose it gives us an excuse to go on another holiday, with all of us."

"Dude." Nick drew the word out with a laugh. "Stop trying to be our Sugar Daddy."

Clay grinned, eyes sparkling from under his bed head, "You can't stop me! It'll be my treat once I hit ten million."

"Oh, so in like two weeks."

Clay rolled his eyes, "Okay, my next birthday then or something. I don't know."

Nick smiled at him fondly. "You're the best you know that?"

Clay smiled back. "I know."

With a laugh, Nick flopped down back into his bed. "Man, I'm excited. I still need to ask my parents but they're totally gonna say yes. They'll probably be glad to be rid of me for a month."

Clay smiled. "Wouldn't be too sure of that, I remember when you came round mine for that week. Your parents were cracking jokes all afternoon, but when they said goodbye they hugged you tight as anything." Clay let out a wheezy laugh. "I thought your ribs were gonna break."

"That's just how we roll," Nick said. "For real though Clay, don't go texting Hannah anything until I've double-checked with my parents. Leave her on read for a bit, she deserves it."

"It's okay," Clay reassured him. "I'll keep radio silence, I promise."

"Thank you." Nick sighed. "This is kinda crazy."

Clay hummed in agreement. "It'll be alright though."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh."

Nick smiled, then rolled over in his bed, head tilted like he was listening through the wall. "Ooh, my parents are getting up. I can go ask them now."

"Oh, awesome. Thanks, Sap"

"No problem. I'm glad I can help to be honest." Nick said, moving off his bed. "I'll talk to you later okay."

"Sounds good." Clay smiled "Love you man."

"Love you too."

His smile growing bigger, Clay ended the call. He rolled over in bed lost in thought. He *felt* like he was making the right decision, but then again he never knew when it came to Hannah. She always clouded his judgement, made him act foolish and rash. Well, *more* foolish and rash. He was likely overthinking things though. The house they rented was on the larger side, Nick and he would have their own room, he didn't even really have to spend time with her. And it would be worth it, worth anything to experience what he'd been looking forward to for so long. *It's going to be alright.* He reassured himself. And at that moment, with the light of the morning streaming through his

curtains and excitement building in his chest, Clay had a feeling that *everything* would be alright. One way or the other.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, that was a long one, thanks for reading & I promise you this isn't a Sapnap/dream fic. I'm just setting the fic up in a roundabout way in order to completely trap the characters in their terrible decisions (mwhaha), Nick and Clay are just bros, promise.

Anyways, I'd really appreciate y'all dropping a kudos if you're liking the fic, and all comments are totally welcome!

The Nastiness of Confrontation

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for all the attention on the first chapter, it really means a lot. Anyways, here we go again, hope y'all enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay could *feel* his mom judging him. He didn't even have to turn his head to know she was staring at him. Grey eyes boring into the back of his skull from across the room. He continued shovelling cereal into his mouth, trying to act as oblivious as possible. Every few seconds his eyes would dart down to his phone, lying on the table beside him. Nick still hadn't gotten back to him.

Clay could hear his mom moving behind him, before she came into view, settling down in the chair opposite him. She cleared her throat pointedly as she settled into the seat, a clear attempt to initiate conversation. Clay continued eating. She cleared her throat again. Clay swallowed his mouthful of food, then looked at her pointedly. "What is it?"

His mom stared back, observing him over the rim of the mug she held in her hands. Clay put down his spoon. "If you feel like you have something to say, I would appreciate it if you said it."

His mom set her drink down. "I just wonder if you've thought about this. That's all."

"I have." Clay sounded petulant, even to his own ears. "I've been thinking about this for a really long time."

"I know honey." Clay's mom looked at him, concern in her eyes. "But you just always act so impulsively, this is a big decision."

"It's a decision I made a long time ago." Clay said firmly.

Clay's mom tilted her head, propping her chin up under one hand. "The last thing you said to us about this trip was that you weren't going."

Clay looked away from her. "Things changed." He began eating again, heaping cereal onto his spoon, then shoving it into his mouth.

"Clay, sweetie, you know I'm only pushing you on this because I'm worried about you."

Clay gave a muffled noise of agreement around his breakfast.

"Your father and I know you're an adult. And we trust you. I just know how much that girl hurt you. It's okay to back down you know."

Clay swallowed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's not about that." It was *so* about that. "I just want to go on holiday. The holiday that I planned and paid for. I don't want to let my friends down, and I don't want to give up this chance to live a little. I spend most of my time cooped up inside playing video games. Surely you should be begging me to go."

Clay's mom smiled at that, picking up her mug and taking a slow thoughtful sip. "I still need to speak to Nick's parents you know."

Clay grinned, he knew he'd won this round. "I told you I'd tell you when he got back to me."

Clay's mom hummed, musing on the situation. "And are you sure your Youtube thing won't suffer?"

"We can film a bunch of videos in advance. I'll be able to take my laptop and edit them while I'm over there."

"I thought you said you needed a holiday?" Her tone sounded serious, but Clay could see a twinkle of mirth in her eyes.

"No rest for the wicked." He quipped.

"And why are you wicked, huh?"

"Because I drive my poor mother to her wit's end." Clay finished up his last mouthful of cereal. "I eat all the food in the house, stay up far too late *and* then try and disappear off to Bali."

She laughed at that, a bright clear sound, and Clay laughed along with her. He left her at the table, still chuckling quietly to herself and went to put his bowl and spoon into the dishwasher. However, when he turned back around she was right there in front of him. Wordlessly, she held out her arms, and Clay stepped into them, wrapping her into a tight hug. He was so much taller and broader than her now, but despite this he still felt like he was a small boy again, safe in his mom's arms. "That boy better take care of you." she whispered in his ear.

Clay smiled into her shoulder. "Surely I should be taking care of him since I'm older."

"Just you both take care of each other, okay?"

Clay nodded. "Okay."

His mom pulled back from the hug, reaching to cup his cheek in her hand. Her other hand ran over his hair, flattening down the scraggly mess. "Don't let that girl hurt you again, you hear me. You just have fun, and be smart."

Clay nodded, feeling a lump form in his throat. "It's not like I was trying to let her hurt me the first time."

His mom pulled him back into another tight hug, and Clay let himself fall back into her shoulder again, burying his face in the comforting smell. "I know sweetheart." She said. "I know."

Clay trudged up the stairs, thoughts buzzing. Once he was in his room, he flopped onto the chair in front of his desk, spinning lazily around on it. His mom had taken the news surprisingly well. His parents had always allowed him a lot of autonomy, thankfully, and as Clay had grown up he'd pushed that freedom further and further. Clay dragged his feet across his carpet, bringing the chair to a stop. He knew his mom was still worried about him, and with good reason. She had been uneasy throughout his explanation and had asked so many questions about every aspect of the holiday. Clay knew it came from a place of love though, every concerned look was a reminder that she cared about him, and that meant more to him than he could ever put into words.

Clay felt his phone begin to vibrate and fished it out from the pocket of his sweatpants. Nick was calling him. Clay hastily answered it.

“Heya.”

“Hey man.” Nick answered.

“What’s the verdict?”

“My parents say it’s all cool, as long as they get all the details from you or your parents.” Nick sounded excited. “My mom seems a little apprehensive but dad’s chill.”

“Awesome!”

“Also my mom’s texting yours right now.” Nick said.

“Oh cool, thanks Sapnap.”

“Hey, no problem. I assume your mom was cool about the whole thing.”

Clay leant back on his chair. “I mean, she was a bit funny about it, y’know, cos it’s Hannah.” He chewed on his lip. “I think she’s a little worried about me, to be honest. But she’s chill with me going as long as you keep me out of trouble.”

Clay heard Nick laugh down the phone. “I’m glad she realises *I’m* the responsible one.”

“Bullshit.” Clay laughed along with him. “Ugh, telling my sister about all of this is gonna be a pain.”

“Which one?” Nick asked.

“Well, both, but I was thinking of Emily.” Clay sighed. “She’s always been so protective, and as soon as she hears it’s about Hannah she’s gonna blow a gasket.”

“Talking about telling people things, you passed the news onto George yet?”

“I was waiting for you to tell your parents.” Clay explained.

“Well, now I have.”

“Mhmm.”

Nick groaned “Come on Dream, don’t be a shitty friend.”

“I’m not!” Clay protested. “I’m just tryna build up the courage.”

“We can go on a call together if you want?”

“Thanks, Sap, but it’s fine.” Clay exhaled heavily. “I’ve gotta do this myself.”

“Cool. I was gonna talk to him later about a video.” Nick chuckled. “I can pick up the pieces of his broken heart.”

“Don’t even joke about it.” Clay groaned. “God I feel like an ass.”

“You shouldn’t,” Nick reassured him. “He can’t go anyway, even if there was space, or you wanted to take him instead. He’s reasonable, he’ll understand.”

“God, I hope so.” Clay ran a hand backwards through his hair, further tangling the mess. “But, that doesn’t mean he won’t still be hurt.”

“Come on Dream.”

“Okay okay.” Clay sighed, “I’ll go do it right now.”

“You better.” Nick paused. “Let me know how it goes okay.”

“Will do. Talk to you later okay.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.” Clay drew out the word until he heard the beep of Nick hanging up. Then let out a long breath. “Come on.” He urged himself. “You got this.” He began idly spinning around on his chair again still putting off the call. His phone buzzed again.

Sapnap: do it u pussy

Clay smiled. Nick knew him far too well. He took a deep breath, trying to clear his head. For god’s sake, he could call his damn friend. He wasn’t some nervous kid about to ask a crush to prom. He was a grown man about to have an adult conversation with his friend, also a grown man. *Get a grip.* He told himself, sternly. Then before he could start doubting the situation, he opened up his conversation with George and began typing out a new message.

dream: Are you free to call?

dream: I need to talk to you abt something

That was it, now everything was in motion. Clay leant back on his chair, mulling over what he needed to say to George. He figured if he just explained everything, clearly and concisely it would be fine. His phone vibrated, and Clay almost jumped at the sound.

George: Sure, I’m free rn

Clay’s finger hovered over George’s name, putting off the call for as long as possible. With a sigh, Clay pressed down.

“Hey.” George drew out the word as he answered. He sounded cheerful, and like he was happy to hear from Clay. It would be around two in the afternoon in the UK, which likely meant that George had likely just gotten up.

“Hi.” Clay returned the greeting with significantly less enthusiasm.

“So what did you want to talk to me about then?” George asked. “If it’s about that plugin you wanted me to do, I know I’m behind but I kinda needed your help wi-”

Clay cut him off. “It’s not about the plugin.”

“Oh. What is it then?” George sounded curious.

With a sigh, Clay quickly stumbled into an explanation. George already knew about the trip from back when it was booked, so all he really needed to tell him about were the recent developments. He glazed over details, forgetting names and dates, stuttered and mumbled his way through his reasoning as to why he was even still going on it before he finished in a rush, waiting with bated breath to hear George’s response. George, unusually, had not interrupted him at all, remaining silent, and now Clay had stopped speaking as well the quiet felt uncomfortable. “Well?” Clay said, impatient to hear a response. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know.” George’s voice sounded small. “What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know, your opinion maybe?” Clay knew he was being a dick, but he didn’t care. After all his anxiety over the call, to have George not say anything was eating him up.

“I guess I’m happy for you. This trip might be the one that helps you finally get over Hannah.”

Ouch. Clay held back another sigh. “I’m really sorry if you feel left out or something.”

“It’s okay, I don’t anyway.” George sounded a little choked.

“And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about this sooner.”

George gave a small, noncommittal sound.

“And, like, you get why I didn’t ask you to come.” Clay was met with nothing but stony silence. “I mean, I would’ve felt guilty asking you.” He implored. Crap. That had probably been the wrong thing to say. “You would’ve had to organise a visa and all sorts, and I know how your parents are.”

After a long pause, George finally spoke. “Yeh, I guess.” His voice sounded strangled. Clay felt a sudden visceral jolt of guilt, deep in his stomach.

“I was thinking we could all go on a trip together at some point.” Clay’s voice was coaxing. “Like a little celebratory holiday. One we plan properly. For us.”

“Sounds good.”

Clay dragged his feet across his carpet. He hated how standoffish George was being. It made him feel like he’d done something wrong. “Are you mad I asked Sapnap instead of you?” He asked quietly.

“Does it matter?” George said abruptly. “I wouldn’t have been able to go anyway.”

Clay murmured an agreement. He could hear the hurt in George’s voice.

George exhaled. “I’m gonna go.”

“Are you sure?” Clay asked. “You don’t have any questions or anything.”

“No.” George’s answer was curt. He sounded a little strangled, as though he were holding back a flood of emotions. “I have a plugin to code.”

“I can help you with that.” Clay mentally begged George to say yes. Anything so that they could keep talking, so that he could make it up to him in some way.

“It’s fine.” George’s voice broke. “Bye Dream.”

“Bye.” Clay said. “Love you.” George didn’t hear him. He had already hung up.

Clay brought the phone down from his ear, feeling tears prick at the corners of his eyes. He didn’t know how that conversation had gone so wrong, so fast. He had the sudden awful feeling as though he’d done something irreparably wrong, something unforgivable. He had known George would be a little hurt, but not as bad as this. The guilt coiled in his stomach, a writhing mass of regret. He just hoped George would come around. He didn’t know how he’d be able to cope if George never forgave him. Clay slumped forward in his chair. *He’ll come around.* Clay told himself, firmly. The alternative was unthinkable.

Chapter End Notes

So that's that, I honestly forgot how utterly draining establishing a plot was. I'm just trying to resist the urge to just blitz through the early stuff and get to the gay panic fueled pining, but I don't know how patient I can be.

Anyways, thanks for reading, and I hope everyone has a great day. ッ(*◦▽◦*)

Reconciliation and Persuasion

Chapter Notes

This chapter is so thicc, I can only apologise o(¬▽¬)ﾌ

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay awoke, sweaty and breathless amid his cocoon of blankets. He wrestled himself free from his bedsheets, head foggy and sat up. His room was a mess, he had a raging headache and the baggy shirt he'd slept in was soaked in sweat, sticking to his back uncomfortably. Clay hastily pulled the sodden garment up and over his head feeling a jolt of relief as the cool air of the room touched his clammy skin. He'd slept terribly. Suppressing a yawn, Clay began hurriedly searching for his phone, foraging through the bedsheets and leaning over the side of his bed to grope around on the floor for it. He dimly remembered falling asleep with his phone on his chest and after further searching found it under his bedside table next to a dirty sock and a lone tissue. Clay gingerly extruded it from under the mess on his floor and checked his notifications. He had heaps of messages, but after almost a minute of scrolling, he didn't see a single one from George. Robotically, he began checking every messaging platform, every one of George's socials, but to no avail. There was nothing. Clay grabbed the baggy sweaty shirt that he'd thrown down onto the bed, and with an angry shout balled it up and hurled it across the room.

He flopped back down on his bed, head pounding. It was crazy to think that only yesterday he had woken up in a fantastic mood, well-rested and ready to enjoy the day. Now, everything was shit. *That's a little melodramatic.* Clay thought to himself, irritable kicking the bedsheets off of his calves. Probably true though. A glance back at his phone told him it was well past noon. Clay had stayed up very late the night before, frantically coding in a desperate attempt to keep his mind off of the conversation he'd had with George. The way his voice had sounded, small and broken. The way he'd probably cried after hanging up. The way he-

Clay groaned, pushing the heels of his palms into his eyes. No wonder George didn't want to talk to him. He'd done the emotional equivalent of kicking him squarely in the face. And he didn't even have Hannah to blame for it. He'd done it entirely of his own accord. *And for what.* Clay thought to himself. *For what you dipshit.* Clay let his hands fall from where they'd been tangling up in his hair. He couldn't even answer his own damn question.

With a heavy sigh, Clay rolled out of bed. It was a weekday, so both of his parents would be at work, meaning he had the house to himself. Clay plodded over to his door and pushed it open with a creak. The house was silent. All that could be heard was the distant hum of cars and the quiet tail-end of a neighbours conversation, sneaking in through the open window. With his isolation confirmed, Clay padded across the hallway to the bathroom, wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants. They were one of his favourite pairs. Once grey, now more of a faded white after the years of washing. The elastic was going and they barely fitted Clay after his many growth spurts, but they were comfy as hell, and he planned to wear them until they were nothing but a handful of

loose threads. Or until his mom threw them out. Most likely the latter.

As soon as Clay had gotten himself into the bathroom and under the hot spray of water he could feel himself relax. His thoughts were still racing, but his shoulders dropped and his muscles unclenched. The warm water dripped down through his hair, over his chest and down to his fingertips. It was cathartic, feeling the droplets trace their way over the curves of his body and he let his mind get lost in the feeling. Lost in the steam and the heavy beat of water. Lost in the cool light of the bathroom and the familiar smell of his shampoo.

Clay finished up his shower and dried himself off, leaving the humidity of the bathroom to pad back across the hallway to his room. Once inside, he let the towel fall from around his waist, adding itself to the growing mountain of laundry on his floor. The damp ends of his hair tickled the bare skin of his neck as he manoeuvred his way across the mess of his room, looking for clean clothes to wear. He got dressed, humming lightly to himself and made his way towards the door. Clay looked back over his shoulder at his phone, lying alone on his unmade bed, before turning back around and walking out the door. He'd spent most of yesterday obsessively checking his messages and was determined to not let himself fall into the same routine again.

Clay made his way downstairs, his bare feet curling into the plush carpet of the stairs. Once he got to the bottom, he paused, looking out of the large french windows into the garden. Patches was sunning herself in the garden, stretched out languidly over the browning grass. Clay had half a mind to go join her in the sun, but an angry growl from his stomach reminded him that food was the priority. He swiftly made his way into the kitchen, conducting a thorough search of the cupboards before deciding on waffles. Clay slid a pair of them into the toaster and as they began to heat up he let his mind wander again. What could he say to George to get him to talk to him again? To make it up to him. He wondered if he could fly out to the UK again, after Bali. But that was such a long time away. He couldn't just be awkward with George for months. One of the worst parts was that he didn't even know *how much* he'd upset George. He wished he hadn't let him hang up now, wished his forced him to stay and talk.

Clay was started out of his thoughts as the waffles popped out of the toaster. He delicately removed them, careful not to hurt his fingers, and set them down onto a plate. Then, after sliding another two waffles into the toaster, he settled down and began to eat. *Fuck*. Clay let out a groan around his mouthful. They were *good*. He hadn't even realised just how hungry he was until he began to tuck in.

"Good morning Clay."

Clay jumped, his head whipping around towards the door. *Shit*. His older sister Emily had snuck into the kitchen and was now staring daggers at him. Clay froze, his mouth still stuffed with food. *Why do I always get jumped at breakfast?* He thought to himself. She stalked towards him across the room, eyes still fixed on him with murderous intent. Clay raised his hand in a limp wave, wondering dimly if it was too late to join Patches in the garden. "Hey Em." He mumbled through his half-chewed waffle. "How come you're home?"

"My college professor's ill." She didn't seem concerned in the slightest.

"Oh," Clay said faintly. "Are they gonna be alright."

"Oh, they'll be fine." Emily smiled brightly. "It's actually quite the happy accident. I've been meaning to talk to you, but whenever I'm home you're all cooped up in your room. Isn't that weird?"

"Mmm." Clay swallowed his lump of food. "That *is* weird." He nodded slowly.

"Clay, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Uh." He looked down at his plate. "Eating breakfast?"

Emily rolled her eyes. "I know you're eating breakfast." She hissed. "I *meant*, what the fuck going on a stupid trip to Bali."

"Ah."

"Mom told me everything."

"Cool." Clay tilted his head as he looked at her. "If you're going to try and talk me out of it don't waste your breath." His tone was firm. "I'm going." At that moment the toaster popped up his second round of waffles, and before he could stop her, Emily reached out a hand and grabbed one of them. Clay sighed, watching her as she smugly bit into it.

"I am aware you're a stubborn bastard." She said. "But I just need to know you understand exactly what your doing."

Clay huffed at her. "I do! And I swear I'm not throwing away my happy little life to undermine Hannah, or whatever dramatic bullcrap you're imagining."

Emily sighed, looking at him with big serious eyes. "Why do you always imagine we assume the worst of you? That we're judging you."

Clay took a large bite of his waffle, looking pointedly away from his sister. She sighed again, resting her elbows on the counter. "It's okay to still hurt, and it's okay to do stupid things because of it. You don't need to justify your decisions, I've known you long enough to understand where your head is right now." She looked him square in the face. "But please don't attack us for worrying and even speculating. Especially when you didn't even talk to us about this trip when it's a huge decision to make."

Clay felt guilt pool in his stomach. He looked up, meeting his sister's eyes in a wordless apology. She gazed back at him, her mouth tugging up to form a sad smile. "I know you're all grown up and I don't get to be your big sister anymore, but we're still family." Emily looked down at the half-eaten waffle in her hands. "You *can* talk to us, you know."

Clay felt his cheeks flush. "I know." His voice sounded small. "I didn't really talk to anyone about it though. Not even George."

Emily threw her head back, exasperated. "And you wonder why he's mad at you?"

"Mom told you about that too, huh?"

Emily nodded. "I think you really hurt him, Clay."

“I fucking know that.” Clay was taken aback by how harsh his voice sounded. He took a deep breath and softened his tone. “I just don’t know how I’m going to make it up to him.”

“Just talk to him.” Emily looked at him, a deep understanding in her eyes. “You two adore each other, I know he’ll come around. You’ve just got to be brave and reach out to him.”

Clay sighed. “I know.” Having George genuinely upset at something he’d done had been weighing on him. His friendship with the other man meant more to him than he could ever really comprehend, they’d changed each other’s lives. Having a falling out over something as inconsequential as this was not how Clay wanted to lose someone like that. He didn’t want to lose him at all.

Emily cleared her throat. “Anyway.” She said. “I did actually have a proper reason to talk to you, besides chewing you out for your terrible life choices.”

Clay tilted his head at her, his eyes curious. “Go on.”

“So I have this friend in my college class who knows Hannah's sister right.”

“Right.”

“And she told me, that Hannah's sister told her that she has a boyfriend now.” Emily chewed her lip, looking at Clay. “I just thought you ought to know.”

Clay nodded slowly, trying to process the information.

“You could always double-check,” Emily said. “Ask a mutual friend or something. I only mentioned since that’s probably who she’s planning on bringing on the trip.”

“Probably.” Clay sighed, before burying his face in his hands. “Ugh, *why* ?” He groaned, letting the word out in an extended breath.

“I know.” Emily lent back onto the counter. “Still want to go?”

Clay’s head shot back. “Yes! One hundred per cent.” He looked up at Emily. “I’m fucking going.”

“Okay,” Emily said with a tut. “You should double-check though.”

“What?”

Emily sighed. “Whether she really has got a boyfriend. This is third party information I’m giving you.”

“I’ll text Scott, he’d know.” Clay sighed. “I don’t know if that’s too petty though?”

Emily shrugged. “I’ve done worse.”

Clay laughed. “I know you have.” He sobered up, his mouth drawing into a frown. It was a slippery slope, this kind of behaviour. He didn’t want to get entangled up in Hannah more than he had to. “Still, I don’t want to be invasive.”

“It’s just a little research.” Emily looked at him, her eyebrows drawn. “She probably already knows all about your relationship status, since that’s public info.”

Clay nodded. "Good point."

"I'm a bad influence on you aren't I?"

Clay chuckled. "I'd like to say yes and blame it on you, but I'm probably worse than you think." He stretched slowly, his joints creaking as his arms met over the top of his head. The shirt he'd grabbed was a little too small and it stretched uncomfortably across his chest. "I'll send Scott a message when I get back upstairs."

"Send George a message too, please."

"I'll give him a call."

"You better, or I'm confiscating your computer."

Clay laughed, getting up to put his plate in the dishwasher. "I'll do it." He sighed. "Thanks for telling me about Hannah's boyfriend by the way."

"Of course." Emily laughed. "You think I'd just let you walk into that kind of situation blind? You probably deserve it to be honest."

Clay laughed along with her, his chest a little lighter as he made his way back up the stairs to his room.

Once in his room, he closed the door shut behind him, manoeuvring his way carefully across his cluttered floor. He should probably tidy up at some point, but that required time and effort, two things he wasn't willing to spend on cleaning. Clay scooped his phone off of his bed before making his way over to his desk and settling into his chair. He leant down flicking the switches under his desk, turning them on one by one in a regular rhythm, letting his PC whirled into life with a familiar hum of fans. While it booted up Clay checked his phone. No messages. At least not from anyone he cared about.

He threw the device back over to his bed with a sigh, then sat there, silently mulling over what to do. He needed to call George, needed to talk to him, but how to even go about asking him. Clay opened up discord, ignoring the collection of messages from yesterday and began typing out a new one to George.

dream: Heya, I was wondering if we could have a call and a chat abt yesterday.

Clay paused for a moment, wondering if it would be too much to add a "Missed you" onto the end of the message. Probably. Allowing no time for second guesses, Clay sent the message with a silent plea that George wouldn't ignore it. After checking his notifications were on, Clay got off his chair and rolled back into bed. Now time to message Scott. He'd spoken to him briefly yesterday, catching up and talking about the trip, so hopefully the message wouldn't come as a surprise. Clay began typing out a message, unsure on how to approach the topic. After several minutes he'd constructed a suitable, non-creepy, relatively friendly message. Or at least he hoped. With that sent he had nothing else to do except sit and wait for a response.

Clay turned off his phone, curling onto his side to bury his head into his pillow. He hadn't thought much about what he would do if Hannah did turn out to have a boyfriend. Was he jealous? Worried? Did he have any reason to be either? It was all such a complex mess that he was approaching blindly, and Clay always hated feeling underprepared. Of course, thanks to Em, and hopefully Scott, he wouldn't be quite so ignorant of the whole situation. It was still shocking though.

Clay was jolted out of his thoughts by a loud ping coming from his laptop. George! He scrambled over to his desk, clicking frantically through to read the message.

George: I'm free to call, I've been wanting to talk to you as well

His mouth dry, Clay reread the message, then reread it again. He sat back into his chair, allowing a moment to regain his composure, mentally running over what he had to say. *Apologise for excluding him. Let him know you care, you moron.* With fumbling fingers, he started a voice call, plugging his headphones in while the call was sent out. Each beep he heard while waiting for George to answer dragged on for a painful eternity, until.

"Hi."

Clay let out a breath of relief. "Heya George, thanks for calling."

"No problem." George sounded quiet, subdued, but not sad. "I kinda wanted to talk to you anyway."

"Cool." Clay paused, wondering how to approach this.

"Is it alright if we switch to a video call?" George asked. "I want to see your face."

"Uh." Clay's mind went blank. George knew what he looked like by now, they even did video calls sometimes, but he didn't exactly want to be seen right now. Didn't want George to know all the emotions that were bound to flit across his face. Clay reached for his phone, hastily unlocking it. "Uhm." He opened up his camera to take a look at himself and had to hold in a wince. His hair had dried into a curly frizz and his wan face revealed every minute of sleep he'd missed out on. Clay's face was usually home to a generous handful of pimples and today a particularly large and angry spot was making itself known on his chin. Yikes. "I'm kind of a mess right now."

"Please."

The soft plea went straight to Clay's chest, he'd already upset George enough. "Okay." He leant across his desk and began to pick the tape off of his webcam. *I'm such a fucking sucker.* He thought to himself.

"Really?" George's tone picked up. "You'll turn your webcam on?"

"Sure." Clay finished picking the tape off, rolling it into a ball and letting it fall amongst the food wrappers and wires that littered his desk.

“Thanks.” George said quietly.

Clay bit back a smile, before reaching over to turn over to a video chat. His face wasn’t well lit, so he looked a little better on his monitor. George over to video as well, his face filling Clay’s screen. He looked as perfect as always, of course. Clay swallowed. “So.” He raised a hand self consciously up to his hair, pushing the mess this way and that. “I really wanted to talk to you.”

George indeed. “Me too.” He bit his lip, eyes wide and shy. “Listen I’m sorry for just rushing off like that, I should’ve stayed and talked, I know you didn’t mean to hurt me.”

“*You’re* saying sorry!?” Clay said incredulously. “*I* should be the one apologising! I made a big decision without even talking to you about it, and then was too scared to break the news to you properly and maturely.”

George ducked his head. “You don’t owe me a conversation every time you make a choice.” He sighed. “Besides, I spoke to Sapnap and he said your mind seemed pretty made up about it.”

Clay gawked at him. “George.” The name came out a little breathless, more of a statement than a question.

“I’m being mature about this.” George let out a stilted laugh before letting his voice soften into something more serious. “I know you didn’t set out to hurt me, so how can I really be mad at you?”

“You know you don’t have to be mature.” Clay looked through the screen at George. He could tell when his friend was being disingenuous, and whilst he wanted to be forgiven he wasn’t going to let George lie to him. “It’s okay to be mad at me. I fucked up. I hurt you.”

“*I was* upset.” George bit his lower lip, eyes darting to and fro evasively. “But it’s your life. Your ex.”

Clay looked at him blankly. “I still should’ve asked for your input. I do value what you have to say.”

George smiled, his cheeks creasing. “I’m literally the most unqualified person to ask about this.” He gestured blindly. “I’ve barely even had a relationship.”

“So? I care about what you have to say.” Clay wondered if this was about something deeper, George hadn’t even mentioned if he was still upset that Nick was going and not him.

George fiddled with the cable of his headphones. “I know you do.” He let out another heavy sigh. “And I accept your apology.” A wry smile twisted over his lips as he looked at Clay. Clay smiled back, a warmth spreading across his chest.

“Are you sure you’re cool about me taking Sapnap? Like I understand if you feel left out.”

George shook his head. “It’s fine.” He swallowed. “I actually mentioned it to my mum, like in passing, and yeah. There’s no way she’d let me go.”

Clay nodded slowly, giving a small hum of agreement. “I mean what I said by the way. I want to go on holiday with you, maybe once you can access a visa, you can fly out to the states. We’ll go on a road trip or something. I’d really like that.”

George smiled warmly. “I’d like that too.”

They both smiled fondly at each other comfortable in the silence, before George cleared his throat.

“What have you been up to then?” he asked.

“Uh, not much.” Clay leant back in his chair. “Stayed up pretty late last night coding.”

“What were you doing?” George asked. “I finished the plugin you wanted me to do by the way. It was kind of simple once I worked my way around it.”

“Oh, awesome.” Clay smiled bashfully. “And it was just this dumb idea I had, it didn’t work out. I was just kind of looking for something to do, to be honest.”

George hummed in agreement. He was looking at him with a strange sort of curiosity that made Clay feel faintly uncomfortable.

“Thanks so much for finishing your plugin though.” He said. “I’ll PayPal you the rest of the money for it.”

“Thank you.” George murmured. “When are we gonna film the video?”

“Maybe tomorrow?” Clay suggested. “Then I can get it up and edited before the end of the week. It’ll be good to have something to break up the manhunts, I don’t want them to get stale.”

George nodded again. “I’m down for that.”

“Awesome.” Clay’s face broke into a smile as he leant back into a stretch. His too-small shirt bunched up around his shoulders again, the taut fabric riding up across his stomach. Clay’s elbows popped as he leant back into the movement in satisfaction. He looked back down at his monitor to see George’s eyes quickly flick away from his torso, a blush flitting across his cheeks. Clay watched him shift awkwardly, deliberately avoiding eye contact. Silence fell.

The quiet stretched out between as George kept his head down, his eyes flitting up to look at Clay through a web of lashes. Just as the silence was bordering on awkward Clay heard the faint sounds of someone calling from the other side of the call. George tilted his head, listening. “Oh frick, that’s my mum,” He said suddenly. “I need to go.”

“You going out or something?” Clay asked, deliberately nonchalant.

“Yeh, furniture shopping.” George raised his eyebrows in faux excitement.

“Oh, for your desk?” Clay asked.

George nodded, biting back another smile. Clay smiled too. He’d been worried for a second that George had been trying to get rid of him, that they weren’t okay at all, but George had been planning on getting a new desk for a while. Relief washed over him as he realised things were finally going to be alright.

“Well, I hope you have fun.” He said drily.

“Oh, I will.” George said, the warm smile still stretching across his face. Clay felt such a pang in his chest when he looked at him. That smile was something else.

“Can we call back later?” Clay asked.

“Sure. You can help me assemble the desk.”

Clay laughed. “God no.”

Another yell came from downstairs and George jumped slightly. “Okay, I really do need to go.”

“It’s cool.” Clay said. “Thanks for calling.” He paused looking at George’s warm brown eyes. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too.” George said softly.

Clay shifted, a hand raising to awkwardly fuss with his hair again. “Bye then.”

“Bye Dream.”

They looked at each other again for a moment, both wordlessly studying the other, before George leant over and ended the call. Clay slumped back in his chair, letting out a deep breath, a warm glow spreading across his chest. It felt good to be talking with George again. He suspected that they weren’t fully alright, but that would take time. They had time.

Clay’s phone gave a buzz and he checked the notifications, wondering if George had sent a message. To his surprise, Scott had gotten back to him with a response to Clay’s question.

Scott: Yea, I figured you find out soon enough. Dw abt snooping, if anyone deserves to know it’s u. They’ve been going out for a while. Don’t do anything dumb.

Clay smiled slightly. Scott was always so blunt, refreshingly so in situations like this. He’d attached a photo with the message and Clay took a look at it, his curiosity building. It was a screenshot of a Facebook post, taken from Hannah’s page. There was Hannah, her hair still bright blond, her face still pretty, eyes clear and bright. He tore her eyes away from her smile to look at the man standing next to her. She was leaning into him, their hands clasped together but he stood tall and straight. His skin was a warm sepia tone that shone in the liquid gold of the sunlight, his face broad with deep-set dark eyes and thick brows, his hair twisted into short black locs that flopped over his forehead in a casual tangle. He stood with his shoulders set back, the epitome of relaxed. Clay studied the photo, his eyes flicking over the man’s face, before flopping back into his chair with a heavy sigh. Clay had come to terms with his sexuality a few years ago. He’d always looked at men with intrigue, something unspeakable stirring in his stomach, but since he was still attracted to girls he never felt the need to examine these feelings. Sexuality was a difficult thing to wrestle with, easier left unspoken and private. He’d come out as bisexual officially around a year ago but tended to quash his feelings for men, his feelings for most people. That being said, he was certainly qualified to gauge the attractiveness of a man, and fuck, this guy was attractive.

Clay let out another sigh holding the phone loosely in his hand. So Hannah had a boyfriend. A handsome public boyfriend who’d apparently been around for a while. He screenshotted the picture Scott had sent before typing out a response to him.

Clay: Thanks man, I rllly appreciate it, thanks for letting me know.

He paused for a moment before adding.

Clay: And dw, I'm fine with it

Whether Scott believed him or not, Clay wanted to reassure his friend. The message sent, Clay moved back over to his computer, typing out a message to Nick. He would need to update him on the whole situation, not just the boyfriend incident but also his reconciliation with George. *Events really were cowards*. Clay thought to himself. *Always coming at me in packs*.

Nick was active, so it only took him a few moments to read Clay's message and start a call. Clay moved to answer and switched over to a video, giving a welcoming smile as Nick's face filled his screen.

"Ooh, we're doing a video call." Nick wiggled his eyebrows. "You get to enjoy my handsome face."

"Yay." Clay said in mock excitement.

"What's the news then?"

Clay took a deep breath, then launched into a summary of events. He explained the conversation with Emily, the talk with George, then lastly what Scott had told him. "I can send you a photo of Hannah's boyfriend if you want."

"Is he hot?" Nick chuckled.

Clay hummed in agreement, sending the screenshot he'd taken.

"Woah." Nick looked up at him. "Jesus Christ, Hannah does *not* deserve that man."

Clay laughed. "Yeh, he's pretty good looking. Doesn't really matter though does it?"

"Well, I don't think Hannah deserves *any* man, let alone one like that."

Clay smiled again. "Is that your official statement on the whole situation then?"

"Yeh." Nick nodded. "She deserves no one and when I meet this guy I'm gonna have to do a psychological evaluation on him."

"You think she's gonna take him with her then. On the Bai trip?" Clay asked.

"Yeh. Definitely. You said they'd been together a while-"

"Allegedly."

Nick cocked his head, looking at Clay dubiously.

“What?”

“What’s the problem, huh? You think this is gonna be an issue?” Nick asked, his tone making it quite clear he already knew the answer.

Clay made a noncommittal noise of dissent, not ready to give a clear response. “I don’t *know* Sap.”

“But what do you *think*. ”

Clay snapped. “What do I *think* ? I think it’s going to be fucking miserable. I think she’s gonna hold it over me, torment me, rub it in my face that she’s moved on and I’m still hurting over shit she doesn’t care about. I’ve never been able to catch a fucking break when it comes to her. She never let me move on and now...” Clay sighed, his mind racing for a way to put his incomprehensible jumble of thoughts into words. “I finally thought I was going to get some closure, and I guess I have, but, it feels weird y’know.” He looked at Nick, desperately aching to be understood. “I don’t know. I don’t *understand* . And I don’t *like* that.”

Nick looked at him thoughtfully, picking at his chin absentmindedly. “I could pretend to be your boyfriend.” He said suddenly. “Y’know, for the trip.”

“What?” Clay was incredulous.

Nick shrugged. “Well, why not? It would save us so much bother if she thought you were with someone. She’d respect your boundaries. Wouldn’t lord over you how she’s moved on and you...” Nick trailed off.

“Say it, you ass.” Clay kept his voice measured, but under the surface, he could feel his anger building. This situation was testing his patience.

“Well, you haven’t.” Nick protested. “I know you still have feelings for her.”

“I *don’t* .” Clay’s voice was higher than usual, an indignant and panicked protest. Nick just looked at him, his eyebrows raised. They both knew each other too well for Clay to pull off a lie that big. “It would fucking never work anyway. Like how would we pull that off?”

“Why not?” Said Nick slowly and thoughtfully. “She knows you’re bi.”

She did, unfortunately, Clay had come out to her while they were still together, admittedly after he’d told Nick and the rest of his friends. They’d both been adamant it would change nothing about their relationship, but Clay had always had a nagging feeling that it had. That his sexuality had maybe provided further incentive for her to cheat. Everyone he’d ever confided had vehemently denied this, insisting that she would have cheated anyway, but Clay was never sure. He shook himself out of his thoughts and answered Nick. “We *cannot* fake a relationship. And I’d say the same if you were a girl.” His voice was firm, his face stoic, but Nick didn’t seem to care.

“Come on.” He wheedled. “If you’re so concerned about her making a big deal of it. Why not bypass all of that, put you two on the same level. We don’t even really need to do anything different, we’re already all over each other.”

Clay sighed, Nick wasn’t wrong. They were both very affectionate, curling up in hugs whenever they hung out in person, sharing seats and food. It was so easy and natural Clay didn’t even think about it, he’d just grab Nick’s hand to pull him this way and that, sling an arm around his neck when he leant into him. He wasn’t like that with everyone, just Nick. They’d known each other for so long and he felt comfortable with the other man.

“You know I’m right.” Nick said with a smirk.

“It’s not *about* that,” Clay grumbled. “I wouldn’t be *uncomfortable* doing it. At least not in that way.”

Nick cut him off. “Then why *don’t* we?”

“*Because* .” Clay groaned, burying his head in his hands. “We can’t *do* that. I’m not the kind of person who is just gonna put up that kind of a charade for a month. And for what?”

“For your sake Dream.” Nick was speaking more frantically now, gesturing towards him. “You know she’s gonna push you around and try and get one over on you, this whole situation’s been sus eve-”

Clay interrupted him, his voice growing steadily louder. “If it was so sus, why the hell did you encourage me to go on it then!?”

Nick barked out a laugh. “I never *encouraged* you. I trusted you to make the right, *sensible* decision and supported you when you needed it. Which is what I’m trying to do right now.”

“Well you can support me as a friend, we don’t need to fake a relationship.” Clay pulled his hand back through his hair again, tangling his fingers on knots.

“You’re right, we don’t need to.” Nick’s eyes softened, his face serious. “And if you hate the idea I will literally never talk about it again.” His eyes narrowed. “But I know how Hannah is. And I know you too. After you broke up with her she hounded you. She didn’t give you a fucking break. She spread rumours, cut you off from your friends, stole your shit, followed you around.” Clay took in a breath, but Nick held up his hand. “I’m not fucking finished Dream. You might be okay with just rolling over and moving on, but I’m not. I’ll never forget how you sounded, all those nights George and I stayed up with you. She broke you man. And I don’t think she’s done playing with you.” Nick paused for breath, looking firmly at Clay through the screen. “If you want to go as friends, I’ve got you. I’ll be in your corner, I’ll say and do what you want me to.” He paused, looking Clay dead in the eye. “And if you want to pretend to be boyfriends I’ve got your back there too. I know you can look after yourself but I also know she’ll treat you differently if she thinks she has to get through me first.” He shrugged. “Hopefully it’ll cut down on the bullshit as well, in case she tries to posture over you like she’s moved and you’re still single, lonely and broken.” Nick grinned, his eyes shining. “Not saying you *are* single, lonely and broken of course.”

Clay shrugged, letting out a small laugh. “Well, if the shoe fits.”

Nick didn’t laugh. He looked straight at Clay, his steely eyes demanding an answer.

Clay shifted uncomfortably. “I doubt this whole thing is just some nefarious plot to get one over on me.”

“I never said that.”

“I know.” Clay propped his leg up onto his chair, resting his elbow on his knee. He looked at Nick pensively. “But like, even if it is sus, what do you want me to do. I can’t not go *now* .”

Nick gestured loosely in front of him. “I gave you a solution.”

“It’s such a stupid fucking idea.” Clay looked at him desperately. “We *can’t* .”

“So let me get this straight.” Nick shifted in his chair, bringing up his hand again to count off his

points on his fingers. "You wouldn't be uncomfortable doing it." He brought one finger down on the other, the first point made. "You feel it may be necessary to do something *like* it as Hannah is known for being a bitch." He flicked a second finger down. " *I* would be comfortable doing it and *I* feel it's necessary."

Clay ran a hand nervously through his hair. "You're probably the only person on the planet that'd be happy pretending to be my *boyfriend* for a *month* ."

"That's real lucky for you then."

"Sap." Clay looked at him, his face stern and serious. "We *can't* . It's too much."

"Think about it." Nick looked at him with earnest eyes. "Talk to Hannah, see if you change your mind."

"I won't." Clay said hollowly. "It's too much."

Nick looked at him, a pout spreading around his lips. Clay knew how stubborn he was and suspected he wouldn't accept the rejection for a while yet. *We can't*. He thought firmly to himself. Faking a relationship to dissuade an ex-girlfriend from pulling her usual shit was crossing some unspoken line. He could deal with her. As a single man.

"I need to go," Nick said glumly. "I'd love to stay and persuade you, but I have a thing."

"A thing?" Asked Clay, curiously.

"Yes."

Clay raised an eyebrow in a silent question.

"I'm mad at you right now so you don't get to know." Nick said, still pouting.

"Tell me later?" Clay wheedled.

"Maybe."

Clay laughed, Nick continued sulking, but Clay could see a shine in his eyes. "Bye then Sap. Enjoy your *thing* ."

"Oh, I will. Enjoying being stupid and stubborn."

"Oh, I do that every day." Clay said with a breathy laugh.

Nick smiled. "Love you man."

"Love you too." Clay grinned. "Talk to you later alright."

"Bye." Nick drew out the word until he was cut off by the beep of Clay hanging up.

Clay lent back from his computer. The talk with Nick was meant to ease his misgivings, not make them ten times worse. He was now more anxious than ever, overthinking every possible scenario and how they could get around it. The thing is, Nick's stupid idea would probably work. Clay knew Hannah quite well, and *if* she was planning anything Clay being in a relationship would certainly complicate things. Even if she didn't plan on pulling anything he was sure she'd been less

of an asshole if he was “taken”. Because if he *was* , that proved he was not only over her but also not lesser than her. Or as Nick had put it, he wouldn’t be “single, lonely and broken”.

Clay flopped down on his chair, letting his arm fall from where it had been resting on his knee. It was all too much. If it wasn’t for him being such a prideful idiot they wouldn’t even be going on the trip and he wouldn’t even have to deal with this. He groaned, looking around his room at the mess on the floor. He had time to clean up, there was nothing to do all afternoon. But he didn’t move. Just stayed sitting in his chair, breathing in the sweat air wafting through the window. His thoughts awfully loud in the quiet of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, welcome to the post chapter ramble. Lemme just say oh my actual gosh, I literally cannot believe we’re only on chapter three and I’ve already gotten this much feedback. Watching the hits and kudos fly up has been absolutely unreal and to all the folk who left positive and encouraging comments, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. As always, lemme know how the chpt was, thanks for reading & have a great rest of your day (or night, we've all been there).

An Evening of Mistakes

Chapter Notes

This one's a lot of introspection, so sorry if y'all are tired of Clay's dumb thoughts, he do be an idiot sometimes

Also thank you for all the support once more, I appreciate y'all SO FREAKING MUCH. EVERY ONE OF Y'ALL, YOU HEAR ME. YES, EVEN YOU, SILENT READER. YOU'RE WHY I DO THIS. YOU'RE FUCKING GREAT!!! ~(^▽^)-~♡

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dusk was settling on the garden. A warm blanket that furred the harsh edges of the landscape, inviting cool breezes and coaxing insects back into life. It was those creatures that formed the soundtrack of the evening, their soft hums and buzzes joining the hush of wind in the trees and the mellow purr of cars from far away. Clay sat, oblivious to the subtle sounds of the gloaming, his headphones firmly plugged into his ears. He'd been sitting outside for a little over an hour now, watching the sun go down, letting the music wash over him in a futile attempt to distract himself from his thoughts.

Despite it only being the evening, Clay felt as though he'd been awake for a very long time. He'd been throwing himself into Youtube for the past few days scouring the internet for future video ideas as well as editing frantically, barely stopping for food. This was both an attempt to keep his mind off of his emotions and preparation for the very long break he was about to take. Now that the trip was drawing closer, he had a hard time justifying a holiday, particularly when he'd just managed to push everything in his favour. *Well, it worked for some people.* Clay thought to himself, taking in a deep breath. Besides, it was too late to back out now. The day after he'd found out about Hannah's boyfriend, Clay had messaged her, accepting the invitation for the trip. They'd exchanged a handful of stilted messages, in which both of them had remained noticeably vague about the extra person they were bringing. This had done nothing but pique Clay's curiosity further, however, he still bluntly refused to accept Nick's offer of a fake relationship, despite his friend pestering him about it. Hannah had been happy he was able to go on the trip, and the others seemed relieved it could all be resolved. Talking with his ex again had been odd. It had felt tense, even through a screen. Worst of all, her PayPal had been giving her issues, so he still had things to sort out. However, after it was fixed, he could send the money and wouldn't need to speak to her again until he got to Bali.

Clay let his eyes drift lazily across the garden, skimming over the patches of crisping grass and curling fronds. He watched the insects as they flew dizzily into the pools of light, spilling from garden lamps and windows. They swooped low in the grass with aimless purpose and Clay tracked them from where he sat, his eyes fixed to the loose paths they spun through the air. With a slight shiver, Clay dragged his eyes away from the swooping bugs. It was getting late and it was getting cold. He pulled down the sleeves of his hoodie, before getting up and making his way back into the house, closing the french windows behind him. His parents were watching TV in the living room, the dirty plates from dinner still stacked up by the sink. The sound of canned laughter

echoed into the kitchen and Clay felt a small pang in his chest. He used to watch TV with his parents all the time in the evening, his siblings were probably in there now, but ever since he'd gotten serious with YouTube, the job had begun to eat away into his family time. He was either asleep or too busy to spend time with them and he felt guilty like he was letting important time just slip away. His brother and sister were only going to be young for so long, he didn't want to grow up and drift away from them just yet. He wanted to sneak into the warmth of the living room, join them with a smile and relax. Ask them about their day, feel like he *belonged*, allow himself to finally forget about all of the problems piling up around him, but something was stopping him. Clay just couldn't bring himself to move. To leave the darkness of the kitchen and see the people he loved. He needed to be alone.

With a sigh, Clay trudged across the kitchen, making his way into the hallway and towards the front door. He had skipped dinner, and his stomach was beginning to complain. With a pang of hunger Clay considered ordering Postmates, and then going back upstairs up work, but he felt restless. He wanted to drive. He hadn't been out in the car for a long time and the wide straight roads of Orlando were always a good place to unwind. He could grab some fast food, eat it in his car, watch the world go by. His hand on the front door, Clay paused, listening to the sounds of the TV creeping down the hall, the faint murmur of his dad's voice. Then, with a deep breath, Clay pushed the front door open, grabbing the car keys from the hallway table and making his way outside into the dark driveway.

He'd decided on Taco Bell and by now the route was so familiar to him he didn't even need to think about it. As soon as he got behind the wheel he knew where to go, the wide roads stretching out before him, strikingly familiar. The area around Clay's house had been replaced with LED lamps years ago, and the light emitting from them was a pure white, lighting the road as clear as day, bright beams that looked almost solid in their intensity. Soft neo-soul music was drifting through the car from the Bluetooth speaker, a soothing sound that lulled Clay as he drove on and on. As he drove he let himself fall back into the rhythm of thoughts that had been marching through his head all day. Ever since he'd found out about Hannah's boyfriend he'd been anxious. Nick hadn't helped either, constantly berating him and teasing him about it, pushing the fake relationship on him *constantly*. The only time he would shut up about it was when George joined them. Even Nick knew it was probably best to give George time before mentioning the trip again.

Clay's eyes were sore. He stared through his windscreen, looking at the empty road, but not seeing it. He knew Nick didn't mean any harm with the jokes but he still felt close to snapping at him sometimes. It was all too much and often he preferred the conversations he had with George when the Bali trip was a distinctly taboo topic. It gave him a break at least. The worst part of it all was that Nick had a point. Every time Clay thought about it he remembered more and more of the awful things Hannah had done. How she'd made him feel. Compared to other relationships he'd seen people go through, it hadn't been that bad, and the balm of time had eased a lot of the pain, but still...

Clay drove and drove, moving gradually into the older areas of the city where the street lamps still held their old illuminance bulbs. The kind that cast a warmer, murkier light over the roads, softer on the eyes. The sun had truly set now and the dark sky was starless as it coated the city in

shadows. His mind was still turning over and over, thinking of Hannah and Nick and George, then back to Hannah again. Nick's words were still haunting him. *I know you still have feelings for her. Clay did*. Hannah had been his first real and proper relationship. She'd changed him as a person, helped him learn and grow, largely for the better. She still plagued his thoughts and even though it had almost been nine months since they had broken up, he still fantasised about her. He would remember the two of them in intimate moments, daydream about taking her places, still clutching onto the memory of her hand in his and how she felt in his arms. He would see her face in crowds, smell her perfume on the wind and hear the echo of her voice as he fell asleep at night. Moving on from someone like Hannah was never going to be easy, to hate and love someone in such equal measures was an impossibility that was tearing him apart.

Another uncomfortable truth was that Nick's crackhead plan would probably work, despite Clay vehemently denying this for the past few days. A familiar mantra was beaten into his skull. Late nights alone staring at the ceiling, under the warm water the shower over and over he'd whispered to himself. *It's stupid. We can't. It's stupid. We can't*. The truth was they *could*. It would be easy as shit to pull off, just hand-holding and long walks, maybe sharing a bed. It would make sense that they hadn't made it public, ravenous fans and all that. Clay's hands were still locked on the steering wheel, beading with sweat. If they created a fake relationship, every problem would fix itself. If Hannah was planning on pushing any bullshit, rubbing it in his face that she had moved on, or even trying to get him back with her, a relationship was the perfect counter. She'd be less of an ass and it would be infinitely easier to manage everything with Nick so firmly by his side. Nick's words echoed around his head again and again. *She'll treat you differently if she thinks she has to get through me first*. Clay reached blindly out with his hand, turning the music up until the soft beat thrummed through the car. *It's stupid*. Something they would never do. *We can't*. However, unbidden, another thought echoed through his head, sounding out over the music. *We could*.

When he got the Taco Bell, the drive-through was empty and Clay pulled right in and up to the window immediately. He turned his music down before he placed his order, letting the sound become background noise once more. He'd asked for the meal so many times the words came out in a regular practised rhythm. The smell creeping in through his window was incredible and his stomach gave another growl. As he drove away from the first window Clay felt a swell of tiredness wash over him. He hadn't been sleeping well and every waking moment was spent working or fretting over the insurmountable problems piling up. At least when the trip came around he wouldn't feel guilty about taking a break from all the work.

As soon as he'd collected his food, Clay pulled around to park in the empty car park of the Taco Bell. The warm bag of food nestled in his lap was sending an irresistible smell through the small space and Clay was almost faint with hunger as he finally parked his car. There was something very secretive about eating in your car. Once the inside lights turned off, no one could even tell you were in there, and with no sense of order inside the vehicle, all pretences of manners could be dropped. And drop them he did. Clay ate like he hadn't seen food in days. Sauce dripped down his hand and onto his wrist, staining the cuff of his hoodie. His mouth was stuffed with food, so full he could barely chew, but he still reached for more, cramming it in. He sat hunched in the driver's seat, feasting on the fast-food like it was the finest cuisine.

Once the bulk of the food was finished, Clay leant back, sipping on his drink. His lap contained a wreckage of empty bags and cartons, stained napkins and half-empty sauce packets. A portion of nachos were balanced on the dash, all that was left of the mountain of food. Clay munched on them idly as he looked out the window onto the empty car park. The bright lights and flashing icons of the city were ugly, but in the darkness of the night, there was a charm to the gaudy display. Perhaps it was only because Clay was so familiar with the landscape that he felt that way, but he still found comfort in it all.

He was interrupted from his introspection by the harsh sound of a text alert, coming from his phone. Clay fumbled for the device in the dark, his hands slightly sticky with sauce. It was Hannah. Clay quickly read through the text, nausea building in his stomach.

Hannah: Hi, sorry it's late but I've finally got my PayPal working. If you could send over the money when you get this that'd be great.

She'd sent the link to her account right underneath and Clay continued chewing idly as he brought it up. He'd had the amount owed memorised in his head for days. One thousand two hundred and fifty-six dollars. Nick had conceded to let him pay, and he was quite happy to. Compared to what he had in his bank account it was nothing. The music was still playing through the car, a soft melody, and at that moment, with his belly full and closure on the horizon, Clay felt at peace. He hummed lightly along to the song as he tapped in his details, verifying the payment and sending the money across with a rush of relief. As a precaution, Clay also typed out a quick message to Hannah.

Clay: All done. Just making sure that was the right amount.

It took only a few moments for Hannah to reply, and Clay was grateful. Now that his hunger had been sated he finally realised how tired he was. All he wanted to do was drive home and sleep.

Hannah: Perfect! The only thing is if we don't get the deposit back we're gonna split the cost, but we can sort that out later.

Clay paused for a moment, nibbling at his lip. He was being a little paranoid, but he wanted to make sure all bases were covered.

Clay: You sure there's no need for people to pay extra based on room size or amount of rooms or anything.

Hannah: Naw, it's all good. I'm actually in a relationship right now, so I'll be bringing my bf. Since we've been together so long we're gonna share a room, meaning you and friend can get a room each without any issues, so no need to pay extra.

Clay narrowed his eyes at the message, inhaling sharply through his teeth in a hiss. His lip curling up as he looked down at the message. "How fucking obnoxious..." He muttered, before trailing off. He sat, seething. She had done that on purpose. He took a deep breath in before rolling his shoulders back, twisting his neck around in a small stretch, before tapping out a response. He studied the words he'd written, still hunched in his seat.

Clay: Actually, I'm bringing my boyfriend too, so we can also share, leaving a room spare. I was thinking I wanted to use the empty room for work.

Clay looked at it for a split second longer before a jolt of rage coursed through him. Blindly stabbing out with his thumb, he sent the message. "Fuck you." He seethed under his breath. "Fuck you."

Clay sat alone in his dark car, staring down at what he'd just sent. A moment passed. Hannah had read it. Then, the realisation of what he'd done set in. Clay switched his phone off, throwing it to the passenger seat. He fell back in his seat, hands reaching up to tug at his hair and bury his face in his hands. "What the fuck!?" Clay spoke in a whisper, eyes wide and unblinking. Then, he sat up abruptly. His hand formed a fist and he hit the dashboard, chips flying everywhere from their precarious position. "What the *fuck*." Clay spoke in a roar this time. Jesus Christ, that had to be the stupidest thing he'd ever done. "What the fuck was that!? You fucking moron. You idiot." Clay was screaming at himself now, regret and anger building inside of him. "You're fucking stupid. So. Fucking. *Stupid*." With every word he hit the dash again and again, to the point he was worried he was going to set his airbags off. "Jesus fucking Christ." The words fell from his lips together in an incoherent mumble. There were nachos all over his lap, layered all over the footwell of the car. "Oh, you've *so* fucked yourself. You're fucked. I'm fucked." Clay buried the heels of his hands into his eyes. "You're such a stupid *fucking* prideful *fucking* stupid *idiot*." The anger was fading now, giving way to worry and regret. Clay genuinely couldn't even begin process what he'd just done. So many times he'd snapped at Nick, telling him he'd never do it in a million years. Too late for that now.

Clay stretched out a hand, feeling on the passenger seat for where he'd flung his phone. The seat was littered with crumbs and chips. They stuck to his sweaty palm and collected on the sleeve of his hoodie. He found his phone and unlocked it, his hands still shaking. Hannah had responded.

Hannah: Sounds good! That should probably be alright with everyone.

Clay didn't respond, letting the phone fall from his hand as he slumped back in his seat again. "What the fuck have I done?" He murmured. Unsurprisingly, the empty mess of his car gave no response. He picked his phone up again and sent a message to Nick.

dream: Can we call??? I kinda did a fuck up

Nick wasn't online and all Clay could do was stare blankly down at his screen, willing the green dot to appear.

dream: PLease

dream: I really really need to talk to you

Clay curled up in his seat of the car. His eyes felt heavy and his chest was tight. He didn't know if he wanted to cry or scream with rage until his throat hurt. He wished he was at home, back in the warm golden living room with his family. Or maybe even hundreds of miles away, with Nick and George. Talking to his *friends*. Being with them, holding onto them. Trying to find a solution to this fucking mess of a problem he'd found himself in. But he wasn't. He was alone. In the seat of a car in a fast food car park, with a hole in his chest and a mess of crushed nachos covering the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Salutations! Since you've stuck around until chpt 4, ur clearly good at making positive life decisions. You should continue this trend by following me on twitter -

[@LolaL1kes](#)

Also, ya girl getting real tired of establishment, so it's speedrunning time

White Noise and Black Nights

Chapter Notes

The angst tag rlly comes in strong in this chpt. I have no regrets

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was exactly a week before Clay flew out to Bali. A week before he saw Hannah again and all the lies he'd been telling himself for months and months would come crashing down around him. A week before he would have to see her again, her blonde hair drenched in tropical sun, her warm smile and clear eyes. The time had flown by. It seemed like only yesterday he was waking up to that text, that single message that had set all his mistakes in motion. Clay felt as though he hadn't slept properly since that day. Hadn't breathed without feeling like his chest was caving in, or eaten without a knot in his stomach.

Clay shifted in his seat, the anxiety building, despite his best efforts to quell it. He was lounging on the sofa in the living room, the telly blaring white noise into the cosy space and even though he was safe his heart began to pick up speed. He had been a wreck these past few weeks. Every moment he wasn't working, planning in frantic preparation for his time spent away, he was constructing plans with Nick, filling out their backstory for their *fake relationship*. Clay was determined that Hannah wouldn't suspect a thing but that meant their story had to be concrete, every detail on point. Nick had booked his ticket a few days ago, a solid landmark that made the whole situation far too real. Part of Clay still couldn't believe what he'd done, what he and Nick were still planning to do. Couldn't wrap his head around how much time they'd spent constructing this facade, and all for the sake of Clay's pride.

Yet, after all those sleepless nights talking on the phone for hours and hours, planning for every conceivable outcome, Clay was more grateful than ever for Nick. Not only did he facilitate Clay's ridiculous overpreparation, but he also comforted him when his anxiety caught up and was a constant reassuring presence. Clay thought back to that night, all those weeks ago where he had screwed up, telling Hannah he had a boyfriend, a boyfriend he was bringing along. Nick had gotten in contact with him as quickly as possible. Hadn't gloated, or even been mad at Clay's impulsivity, but instead had comforted him. Cracking jokes about Hannah, and the stupid mess he had gotten himself into, yet also calming Clay down soothing him through the phone. There had been a few jokes at Clay's expense, but they came later in the weeks that followed, once Nick had been sure that his friend was alright. Clay would always be grateful for the bond he shared with the other man. To have someone to be so comfortable with was a blessing and he couldn't think of anyone else he would rather have by his side on the trip to Bali.

Clay was startled from his thoughts by the sound of his dad entering the room. He raised a hand in greeting and shifted along the couch, making room to sit. His dad paused, looking down at him in his cocoon of blankets.

“Why are you moping in here?” He asked, his tone gentle.

Clay grinned slowly up at him. “It’s nice to see you too.”

His father smiled back at him, before crossing the room to turn off the television. The unwatched sports game flicked off the screen and a heavy silence fell on the room. The settee creaked as Clay’s dad settled into it and Clay twitched his blanket away from him a little, suddenly embarrassed of his mournful position.

“How are you doing?” Clay’s dad asked.

Clay shrugged. “I’ve been better.”

His dad tutted. “You’re working yourself too hard. Your conviction is admirable, but there’s not much use going on holiday if you kill yourself with exhaustion before boarding the plane.”

A wry smile tugged at Clay’s lips. “I’ll be alright. I’ve got a couple more videos to film and then that’s it. I promise.” He snuggles back into the warmth of the blankets. “I’ve got this.” he said, more to himself than his dad.

“I know you do.” His father’s face was warm and reassuring and Clay felt some of the panic that lingered in his belly dissipate.

They shared a moment of companionable silence, the two of them, just sitting there. Clay had always been close to his dad, close to both of his parents and whilst communication wasn’t always as easy as he would’ve liked, he knew his family was there for him. Clay spared a glance to the man who sat beside him, the man he’d admired for most of his childhood. Whilst his father’s hair was far darker than his own, and the weathered skin aged with a web of lines, Clay could still see traces of his own features in the face. The stubborn set of their lips and line of their jaw were practically identical, and there was something reminiscent of Clay’s own face when he studied his dad’s brow and eyes. Part of Clay wanted to open up to him, let all of the worries spill out of him, however small or embarrassing, but he just couldn’t. He was growing up now and part of that process was learning to deal with things on his own. There was something shameful in confessing the extent to which all of these things had hurt him.

“How are your friends doing?” Clay’s dad asked, shattering the comfortable silence.

“Uhm, if you mean George, he’s doing alright, I think he’s like, properly okay with me now.”

“That’s good.” Clay’s dad mused. “You know I was really worried about you two.”

“How come?”

“Well, y’know. From what you’ve told us, he’s always been quite a sensitive boy and to drop something that big on him like that.”

“He’s not *sensitive* .” Clay scoffed. “He’s a grown man.”

Clay’s dad appraised him, an eyebrow raised. “Still... what you did was hurtful.”

Clay shifted in his seat, feeling awfully like a schoolboy being told off. His father didn’t often reprimand him, they hadn’t even really spoken about the trip at all.

“I know your mother was hurt that you didn’t consult us.”

Clay nodded mutely. “I spoke to her about it though, I apologised. I apologised to George as well.” Clay was aware of how petulant he sounded, but it was true. He had sat down with his mom, promised to be more transparent with her.

“I know, and I’m not trying to tell you off. I know you’re far smarter than all of us put together.”

Clay’s face twisted. “You know I don’t think that.” He said, softly.

“Well, you act like it.”

Clay pulled his blankets up towards him, wrapping his arms around himself defensively. He felt the urge to say something else, to get the last word in, but he forced himself to stay quiet. He was too tired to argue, so the pair of them fell back into a frosty silence.

Clay’s dad cleared his throat. “Clay. I’m not angry at you.”

Clay shifted on the sofa again, deliberately not meeting his father’s eye.

“You have something really special with your friends and I don’t want to see you throw it away, especially over that girl.” His voice soured at the end of the statement and Clay looked over at his dad in surprise, a little shocked by the bitter tone. “Just be smart, okay. I know you’re all grown up.” Clay’s dad barked a laugh. “Hell, even when you were a kid you were stubborn as anything.” His tone softened as he met Clay’s eyes. “But please. Look after yourself, and your friends. I’m only tough on you because I love you, you know that.”

Clay swallowed, trying to dislodge the lump forming his throat. “I know.” He said, his voice almost a whisper.

“C’mere.” Clay’s dad held out his arms and Clay flopped into them curling up into his father’s warmth. Once again, he felt like a child, but this time it was comforting rather than hurtful. “It’ll be alright.”

Clay nodded again, unable to speak. His shoulders finally dropped and he let out a breath that felt like he’d been holding onto it for days. He felt his eyelids droop and his dad held onto him, warm and safe.

“Did you eat today?” Clay’s dad asked him, his voice a soft murmur.

Clay smothered a yawn as he thought, trying to remember the past few hours, “Yes?” He said, his voice tinged with uncertainty. “No, wait, I did, I got Postmates.”

His dad sighed as he looked over at him. “Well, there’s that at least.”

Clay nodded contentedly, smiling to himself.

“Have you packed yet?”

“I have a pile.” Clay mumbled, blinking blearily.

“What’s the bet? You’ll be packed an hour before you leave, or two?”

Clay sniggered. “That’s optimistic.”

His dad laughed along with him, his arm wrapped around Clay's shoulders. "D'you wanna go to bed?"

Clay shifted again. "I probably should."

His dad loosened his arms and let Clay slip out of them. Clay stood, the blanket falling from around his torso. His vision danced and his head felt heavy as he got to his feet, already missing the safety of his dad's arms. He looked back down at his father, sitting stoically on the couch.

"Goodnight." Clay mumbled

"Goodnight." His dad smiled at him. "Sleep well."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Clay trudged out of the living room, down the hall and up the stairs, feeling more and more like a lost child with every step. When at last he made it to his room, Clay stumbled through the threshold swinging the door shut behind him with a click. His lips pursed, he surveyed the mess of his room, the growing mounds of laundry, sorted into clean and unclean in preparation for packing, the tangles of wires spilling across his floor out of cardboard boxes and screwed plastic bags, the mounds of fast-food wrappers, swamping his bin and cluttering his filthy carpet. Clay scrunched his nose in disgust. He had planned on tidying, but the load of work had gotten the better of him, as well as the mental connection he'd made between "tidying" and "packing". And "packing" was, of course, synonymous with "very scary trip to Bali with very bad ex-girlfriend and a crackhead plan to be in a relationship with my best friend".

Clay let out another heavy sigh as he crossed the messy room, flopping bonelessly onto his worn mattress. He'd bought a new wireless charger recently, the box was still likely lurking in the corner of his room, and his phone sat atop the sleek cradle. Clay stretched out his arm groggily and scooped his phone off of the charger ignoring the tuneful beep that sounded from the device. With another slow yawn, he began to flick through his notifications, surprised to see around a dozen missed calls from Nick. With a flare of alarm, Clay wondered what on earth could've happened. The plane tickets were already booked, and, as far as he knew, Nick was well and ready to go. Frantically Clay opened his messages, his eyes skimming across his screen.

Sapnap: Dream plz pick up

Sapnap: I rllly need to talk to

Sapnap: Pleassee

Sapnap: It's about the trip

Sapnap: COME ON DREAM

Sapnap: PLEASE

Sapnap: I need to talk to you fr

Sapnap: DREAM

Sapnap: CLAY PLEASE PICK UP

Hands shaking Clay frantically began calling Nick, willing his friend to pick up, begging that everything would be alright. The dialling seemed to stretch on for an eternity, until at last, Nick picked up.

“Hello.” Nick’s voice was a broken mumble as it crackled down the phone and Clay felt the lump in his stomach grow.

“Sap! What’s wrong, what happened?” Clay stumbled over his words in a desperate rush. “I’m so sorry I didn’t pick up, I was downstairs and I didn’t have my phone, what *happened*?”

“Dream,” Nick’s voice cracked with anguish. “It’s my grandma. She’s really frickin sick, and I don’t even know what’s happening, and my dad’s been calling people all day and I think it’s *serious*.” He gulped. “And my mom, my stepmom, she’s packing and I think we’re all going down to see my gran, but no one’s telling me *anything*, no one even knows anything, and Clay...” Nick choked on his words as he spoke and Clay wanted nothing more at that moment than to wrap his friend up in his arms. “It’s bad, it’s really bad. My parents *never* get like this, I’m fucking worried Clay, I’m scared.”

“*Hey*.” Clay tried to sound as comforting as possible. “It’s gonna be alright. You’ve got this, you’re one of the strongest people I know, it’s going to be *okay*.”

“But I don’t know what I’m gonna *do*!”

“You don’t need to do *anything* Sap, just be there for your family. You’re already almost packed, finish up and *go with them*. They need you and you’ve got this.”

Nick’s breathing was heavy as he gulped down the phone, and Clay felt his chest constrict with emotion. “Your grandma is gonna be *alright*. She’s always been healthy, c’mon Sap, it’s gonna be *okay*.”

“But...” Nick, took in a deep breath before continuing in a rush. “If I go down to see my grandma, I won’t be able to come to Bali.”

“*Nick*.” Clay sighed. “It’s *alright*. You don’t need to be worrying about that right now”

“It’s not alright!” Nick’s voice wobbled as he cried out, exasperated. “I said I’d be there for you! You can’t do this *alone*.”

Nick’s voice rose with emotion and Clay felt his chest tighten. “Nick-”

“Don’t say it’s okay, it’s not okay, I let you down!”

“You *didn’t*.” Clay implored him. “You can’t control this!”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s my fault or not! The trip’s all screwed up now and...”

“N-no, no, no.” Clay’s words came out in a rushed mumble, a frantic attempt at consolation. “You do *not* need to be worrying about the stupid trip right now, this is your *family*.” Clay stared blankly ahead, willing his friend to understand. “It doesn’t *matter*. What matters is you can be there for the people you love. You’ve got enough to worry about, ignore the trip. Cancel the plane ticket. Forget about it.”

Nick's voice crackled down the phone, his voice shaky, wracked with guilt. "I *can't*."

"You *can* ." Clay implored. " *This* is what matters, your grandma, your *family*."

"What about *you* though?" Nick sounded as though he was holding back a sob.

" *Nick* " Clay said firmly. "I need you to listen to me! This matters *more*. This is about your family and you need to be there for them. I know you're upset right now but I *promise* you haven't let me down."

Nick was silent for a moment, his breathing heavy. "Promise?" He asked, his voice a broken mumble.

Clay swallowed, trying frantically to keep his eyes dry. "I promise you." He felt a tear slip out of his left eye and trace it's way down his cheek. "It means the world to me that you care so much, and I promise that you could never let me down, Sap."

The two men sat in silence, overcome with emotion. Then, there came the distant sound of Nick sniffing, and then the very loud blowing of a nose. Clay scrambled for a tissue off of his bedside, yanking one out of the box and firmly wiping his face. He gave a small smile as a second loud blow blasted through his phone.

"You alright there?" He asked with a small chuckle, still drying his eyes.

"Yeh," Nick gave a small laugh as well. "Just oh my god Clay, I'm so *sorry* ."

"Nope," Clay hushed him. "I don't wanna hear it. Remember, *it's not your fault* ."

"I'm allowed to feel bad." Nick grumbled. "You don't need this at the moment."

"Sap, I'm gonna murder you."

Nick gave another giggle. "Okay, okay." He let out a huff, then a little hiccup. "Ugh."

Clay yawned, with a long lazy stretch of his jaw. His bedroom was warm, if a little stuffy, and the heavy emotion of the night was finally catching up with him.

Nick sighed. "I'm gonna have to finish packing, I think we're leaving tomorrow."

"You want me to stay up with you?" Clay asked.

"Naw, I'll let you get to bed."

"You sure?" Clay gnawed at his lip. "I don't mind staying up, I wanna make sure you're alright."

"I'll be okay." Nick gave another quiet hiccup. "I'll let you get to bed. And I'll go cancel that plane ticket right now."

"Okay, sounds good man."

"You know," Nick paused, as though pondering over something. "There's no harm in staying behind as well Dream, like if this isn't an excuse I don't know what is."

"No," Clay said firmly. "I want this damn trip. I'll just go alone and I'll fucking enjoy it." Clay's

jaw was set and his eyes steady and firm. "It might even be easier, not having to fake a relationship and all that."

Nick gave a soft hum of agreement. "Do you ever just, give up."

"Not over something like this I don't."

Nick gave another sigh. "Just go get some sleep man."

"Will do." Clay's lips formed a wry smile, fondness building in his chest. "I love you, Nick. And I really hope everything turns out alright."

"It will," Nick said, his voice strangely confident. "I love you too."

There came a small beep as his friend hang up, and Clay released a long breath, heavy in the quiet of his room.

With a small choked noise, Clay flopped down onto the bed, his mind was numb as he ran over the conversation in his head. Nick wasn't going with him anymore, he *couldn't*. It was just going to be him, all alone for a whole month. Clay swallowed, letting his phone fall from his numb hand. There was no way he would've still asked Nick to come with him but the reality of what he would have to go through was setting in. Clay's stomach churned as he pictured the days stretching ahead, no longer a fun holiday with his best friend but a month of lonely boredom with his fucking *ex*. *How am I gonna get through this now?* Clay thought to himself, the heavy weight of blame settling on him.

With a small shake of his head, Clay spurred himself into movement, slipping off his worn mattress and stumbling over to the window, his feet catching on dirty laundry as he made his way over. With a small exhale, Clay pressed his warm face up against the cool glass, tilting his neck to look up, up and out into the clear night sky. The heavens were nothing but a deep black pit, starless due to the light pollution of the city and unforgiving as they bore down on Clay's tired eyes. It was deep and expansive like dark molasses or a giant pupil, staring unblinkingly into the sprawling mass below. Clay shivered as he stared at it, his mind racing away, buckling under the weight of his thoughts. *All these problems and no solutions*. He thought to himself, gazing up into the sky as though he could find an answer, spelt out in a constellation of satellites. Yet, try as he might, he couldn't will a solution into existence, couldn't force the heavens to fix his problems. So there he stayed. Alone and lost, up against the window, staring into the deep black of the night.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thx for reading- drop a kudos if you're liking my absolute masterpiece.

Click all the good buttons, support ur local writer, you know you wanna \ (✿°▽°) /

A Change of Plans

Chapter Notes

(o °▽ °)o☆ Enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay didn't know what awoke him. Maybe it was the lazy hum of the ceiling fan, stirring the muggy air of his room. Perhaps the soft echo of voices, rising through the floor or the warm purr of Patches by his side. Someone had pushed open his door in the night and it stood ajar wedged upon on the clutter on his floor. Patches had likely been scratching at the wood and someone had taken pity on her, allowing her to slink into Clay's room and sleep beside him. She certainly hadn't been there when he'd fallen asleep last night, curled up in his blankets in the early hours of the morning, cheeks wet with tears and head still racing.

Clay stretched, letting out a slow yawn and twisting his neck side to side to hear that familiar satisfying pop. He moved slowly, careful not to wake the sleeping cat beside him. Patches looked so small and fragile as she lay there, her limbs tucked away and her green eyes shut tight. Clay raised a shaky hand and brushed it along her back. Her spine rose and fell in a steady rhythm, the tiny body a comforting presence under his clammy palm. For the last few weeks, Clay had felt so achingly alone, to the point that even brief contact with his pet felt precious. He felt another stab in his chest as he remembered that the next month would bring little change to the ache of loneliness.

With a groan, Clay rolled out of bed, battling a wave of nausea as he got to his feet. It had taken him hours to fall asleep last night and while he didn't regret his decision to tell Nick to stay behind, a part of him still selfishly wished for his friend. Nick had been one of the sole reasons he had even said yes to the trip. They'd planned for the fake relationship, sure, but they'd also planned a whole host of activities to do, just like it was a normal holiday. They'd poured over maps of the surrounding town and country, Clay had even managed to convince Nick to buy his first pair of hiking boots, and there'd been distant dreams of going camping in the nearby forest. Clay's brow furrowed as he tried to drag his thoughts away from the mounting pile of "what ifs". He knew he'd feel better after getting dressed, showering, maybe even grabbing some food. *Things won't be as bad as they feel right now*, he tried to tell himself. Yet the positivity felt hollow as his chest tightened. With a surge of self-loathing, Clay realised he hadn't even spared a thought for Nick's grandmother since waking up. *Selfish fuck*, he cursed himself mentally. With another biter groan, Clay stumbled over to the door. While he'd given up on happiness, he still needed to eat, so he resigned himself to trek downstairs and attempt to take care of himself.

After a quick shower and a hasty breakfast of eggs, Clay returned to his room again, feeling like a caged animal as his eyes roamed over the familiar walls. While walking up the stairs he had hatched a plan to tidy today, eager for something to do, but as his door closed behind him, he wanted nothing more to sleep and never leave his bed. With a heavy sigh, he collapsed at his desk, his spine curling into the curve of his chair. Patches was still asleep on the mess of his bedsheets,

oblivious to her owner's distress. Clay leant over to flick on his PC, watching the way his cat's ears twitched at every click. He hoped she wouldn't miss him too much when he went away to Bali. He had halfheartedly considered bringing her with him, but he knew that wouldn't be fair. Another wave of apprehension washed over him as thought back to the night before. No Nick. All that planning, all the times they'd gone over their story, again and again. It was all for nothing.

Clay spared a glance back over to his computer. It had finally booted up and to his surprise, he saw he had a message from George. It would be some time in the early hours of the morning for his friend, and George was never one for idle good morning messages. With a twinge of curiosity, Clay opened the notification, nibbling on his lip as he read through the message.

George: Sap told me what happened and I was wondering if you wanted to call and have a talk abt stuff

Clay furrowed his brow. *What on earth could that be about?* He thought to himself. Hesitantly, he tapped out a response.

Dream: I'm not busy so feel free to call me when u get this

Clay leant back in his chair, feeling his curiosity grow. He supposed George could just be checking to see if he was alright, but that was a conversation they could have over message. He only ever asked to call when there was something important to discuss. With a start, Clay lurched forward in his chair. George had started a call and the loud sound had startled him. A little embarrassed, he leant forward and accepted it. George had his camera on, and his pale face looked a little sullen, washed out in the light streaming through his window. "Heya." Clay said, his voice a little raspy from lack of use.

"Hey."

"It's good to see you." Clay's camera was off, but he still ran a hand through his hair self consciously, as though George could see him. George gave a non-committal sound of response, and Clay thought he looked a little nervous as he shifted in his chair.

"Any reason why you wanted to call then?"

"Yeh, actually," George bit his lip, his eyes darting about. "I wanted to talk with you about the Bali trip."

"Ah." Clay wasn't really surprised. Of course, Nick would've called George as well. "The Bali trip."

"I-uh." George bit his lip. "Sapnap called me. Gave a little update on his situation." George waved his hand vaguely, hesitant to elaborate.

"Mhmm," Even though George couldn't see him, Clay still kept his expression guarded, his jaw

tense. "It's a real shame isn't it."

"Did you tell Hannah that he can't come yet?"

Clay bit his lip. "Not yet. I was gonna do it later today or something."

George nodded, "That's good then." He paused for a moment, taking in a deep breath, then a little nervous he stuttered on. "Listen, I know I wasn't your first pick, and I'm okay with that. I just need you to know I'm here for you if you still want someone to come along with you."

Clay sat hunched in his chair, his hands twisting themselves into knots in his lap. "What do you mean?" He asked.

"I can go with you," George spoke in a rush and Clay could clearly see the uncertainty on his face. "It's not fair to make you go alone, and there's still time. I can book the ticket today, be packed pretty quick as well. Then you don't need to be alone, Dream. And I know that the whole relationship thing will be hard but I can do it! We've got time and Sapnap said you had a plan--"

"George!"

George stopped speaking, his teeth jutting forward to gnaw at his lip as he looked nervously into the camera.

"Please just give me a moment to process this." Clay's voice was shaky when he spoke. "I'm tired and I need to *think*."

George's mouth settled into a pout. "What's there to think about? You don't want to go *alone*."

George spoke defensively and Clay let an inadvertent sigh fall from his lips. "It's a lot of time away. In a completely foreign country. I don't want you missing a whole month out of pity for me."

"Dream." George let out a small laugh. "This isn't a pity thing. I *am* your friend. Like I feel sorry for you but I also *want* to go."

"What about your mom though. You said there was no way she was letting you do this."

"Dream, I'm twenty-three years old."

Clay swallowed, a little embarrassed. "Last thing you told me--"

"Yeah well, last time we properly spoke about it I was just trying to stop you from feeling bad." George's brows twisted defiance. "My mum is hardly gonna stop me from going on holiday."

"So you lied."

"Yeah, I lied! Now do you accept my offer or what."

"George." Clay drew out his friend's name in a groan, letting his head fall into his hands.

"I know you *can* do this alone Dream, I'm just saying... You don't have to." George looked so small and alone as he sat in that empty room of his, and Clay felt his heart tug. He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to persist. "It really means a lot that you're offering this George." Clay kept his tone measured but he still saw George's eyes narrow at his words. "But it's a *big thing*. It's not gonna be easy to keep up that kind of act for a whole month, and my ex is..." Clay trailed off, waving a hand in a loose gesticulation "Well, you know how she is."

George nodded stoutly. “I *do* . And that’s exactly why I’m offering to come along.”

“Yes, I get that! And I *appreciate* that. I just wanna make sure you’ve thought about this properly. Not just made a rushed decision out of pity. It wouldn’t be right to jus-”

“ *Clay* .”

Clay gave a start at the sound of his real name. George had said it so sternly and it was unusual for him to even refer to him in that way.

“When you were making this decision a month back, I bet everyone told you to slow down and think.”

Clay swallowed nervously. George had got him and he knew it.

“Can’t you trust I know what I’m doing, just like I trusted you to know? Back when you decided to accept Hannah’s offer, to go on this stupid trip, like, yeah, I was hurt. You didn’t talk to me and that *hurt* . But I never told you to *stop being stupid*” George dragged air quotations around the words with his fingers, “Or *think about shit* . I just trusted you, because I know you’re not an idiot.”

Clay felt guilt pool in his stomach, his mind moving fast to pick apart George’s words. “Just because I’m asking you to think about it doesn’t mean I’m calling you an idiot.”

George pursed his lips, a single eyebrow raised in disdain.

“I just feel like giving up a whole month of your life, for my sake isn’t worth it. Not to mention how fucking long the flight is in itself. You have shit going on. You can’t just drop it all at a weeks notice to go an-”

“Fuck it, I’m not listening to you anymore.” George cut Clay off mid-sentence and began to move, clicking hastily at his computer.

“George!”

“Stop saying my name, I swear to god.” George grinned. “I’m booking the plane ticket right now, by the way.”

“Can you just stop? Can we just talk about this?” Clay heard the desperation building in his voice but he didn’t care. “George, this is *serious* .”

“I know” George was still clicking away. “I’m *being* serious.” He was fully focused on his monitor, deliberately ignoring his friend and Clay felt a surge of frustration at the way he was acting. “Sap said you were getting a layover in Dubai, would you want to meet up there and take a second flight together?”

“N-No.” Clay’s tone was incredulous as he stuttered out a protest. “No way are you actually doing this.”

“Just tell me. I need to book this.”

“George. You can’t be *serious* .”

“I can just ask Sapnap y’know. C’mon Dream, are you stopping in Dubai?”

“Yes. I’m flying into Dubai International at noon.” Clay sighed, exasperated. “Then I’m getting on

a separate flight to Denpasar in the evening, but please George, listen to me, don't just go off and book it *right now* .”

But George's face was already twisting into another smile as he resumed his pattern of clicking and typing.

“George...”

“The only flight I can get comes in at three, is that alright?”

“Oh my god.” Clay's words came out mixed with a nervous laugh.

George lent over, his face off camera and began rummaging around loudly for something.

Clay sighed again. “You *can't* be fucking serious about this.”

“Aha.” George finally retrieved what he was looking for, the small rectangle of plastic that was his bank card. He held it aloft in his hand, the smile still on his face.

“ *George* .” Clay's face scrunched up as he pushed his hands roughly over his forehead. “Can we at least talk about this, can we stop for two seconds and *talk* ?”

“What is there to talk about, *Clay* ?” George was still typing in numbers as he spoke, the heavy clicking audible through the call.

“You don't know what you're getting yourself into.”

“Hmm, yes I do.”

Clay slammed his fist down on his desk, sending loose cables and food wrappers everywhere. “Jesus *Christ* will you just *listen* to me!”

George stopped moving at his computer, his chin jutting forward and his mouth opening as though about to say something. Then, he paused, ducking his head down again, his dark eyes a stony invitation to speak.

Clay took in a deep breath, a little ashamed of his outburst. “It's a long way away from home, a whole month when you won't be able to upload like usual, livestream like usual. You'll miss out on growth, potentially even brand opportunities if it offsets your channel too much.”

George let out a groan, “I already know all this.”

“Please let me finish.”

“Finish what? Finish throwing a tantrum because I'm not listening to the same bullshit I already *know* ?”

Clay let out a derisive laugh. “I don't think you do *know* . We're gonna have to share a *fucking* room, sleep in the same bed, hold hands, hug and be close, all the shit you *hate* .”

George closed his mouth, looking down away from the screen, suddenly fixated on his desk. “Is it because I'm gay?” He asked, his voice quiet.

“ *No* .” Clay spoke in a reassuring whine as his hand ran through his hair again, tearing at the roots in exasperation. “You're such an *idiot* . I just meant cos you don't like physical contact, that's *all* !” Clay let out a heavy sigh. “I'm literally bi. You know I don't care. I've never cared.” It was true. George had come out to Clay fairly recently, compared to the length of time they'd known each

other, and Clay had made it very clear that he felt nothing but support for his friend. He wanted to feel exasperated that George still even considered his sexuality a hurdle, but he knew from experience it was easy to perceive yourself as an outsider. When so many people would spend every second making sure you never forgot you were different, it was hard to drop the wariness, even when you were around those that you *knew* wouldn't judge.

George was silent for a very long time before he turned back towards his computer screen. When he spoke it was in a soft voice, devoid of its previous ferocity. "I don't mind physical contact."

Clay blinked in incredulity. "Of all the things to comment on..."

"It matters!" George said with a slight laugh. "My point is we can pretend to be boyfriends just *fine*. If you don't care and I don't care then what's the fucking problem?"

"But..." Clay's resolve was waning. In all truthfulness, he *didn't* want to go alone. Even though it would be unfair for George to come along, part of him didn't even care anymore. Dealing with Hannah on his own would be *insufferable*. "I can do this on my own." Clay tried to sound stern, but his voice wavered at the end of his sentence.

"Yeh, but you don't have to." George's voice softened as he looked at Clay through the screen. "Please. I want to do this, I want to help you. You've helped me so much, more than I say." George swallowed and looked away from the camera. When he spoke again his voice was quiet. "I know I'm not always the most attentive or affectionate friend. I know I'm different in ways you..." "George's voice trailed off and he seemed almost painfully self-conscious. "I just care about you, Dream, that's all. And I don't mind how rough this trip's gonna be, I'll do it for you. It'll be easier for you if I'm there and that's all I need to know. Trust me, please, you don't need to feel guilty." George swallowed. "I wanna do this." He looked at the camera, his eyes wide and glossy. "I care about you."

Clay was silent for a long time, mulling George's words over in his head. When he finally spoke, his voice was rough "Book the goddamn ticket then."

"Yes!" The excitement in George's voice was audible as he drew out the word into an elated hiss. "This is gonna be *fun!*"

Clay lent back from his monitor, dragging his hand roughly across his eyes.

"Hey Dream." A warm smile flitted across George's face. "Thank you."

Clay gave a wan smile of his own. "Surely I should be thanking you. I mean it when I say this trip would've been insufferable without you."

George let out a long sigh. "Then why the hell did you put up such a protest!" He seemed exasperated as he continued to click away at his computer. "Why do you do this? You could've just said, *yes George, I'd love to have you along, and by the way, thank you so much.*" George spoke in an imitation of an American drawl, and Clay couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

"I just would've felt bad."

"You're such an idiot." George grinned. "Can't believe I just spent all this money on you."

Clay fended off a stab of guilt. He hadn't even considered the cost of the ticket. "You mean it's all booked now?"

"Yep," George wiggled his eyebrows. "How exciting."

"Yippee." Clay said, in a parody of joy.

"How do you go from grateful to grumpy in like a minute?"

"Oh, that's easy." Clay stretched in his seat, a real smile breaking across his face. "I just remember I have to spend a month with you and my mood goes *way* down."

"Oh, haha. I can still cancel this shit, you know that."

"Naw, you wouldn't, you *care* about me too much." Clay had intended to sound mocking, but his tone came across surprisingly sincere and George blushed slightly at his words.

"I do care."

Clay nodded. "I know you do. And thank you. I reckon this is gonna be fun."

George smiled warmly. "I hope so. Though you do have to get me up to speed on our relationship."

"Our long romantic relationship."

"D'you reckon Hannah's gonna quiz us or something?" George asked.

"Well, no. But I just don't want her suspecting anything's off. I think I'd die from embarrassment."

"I still can't believe you even did that." George giggled slightly. "I remember Sapnap telling me you were so against the idea, then you had one conversation with Hannah and just lost it."

"Not *really*." Clay bit his lip as he thought back to that night. "It was pretty stupid of me, but I didn't *lose it*."

"Whatever. You're right though, it was dumb as hell."

"Well if you're coming with me you've gotta play along."

"I know." George's forehead creased as he frowned. "I was just teasing. I'm *not* gonna let you down."

"Thank you. We can go over the details now if you want. I've got a doc I made with Sap, and while we'll probably have to modify some of the stuff, it shou-"

"Wait," George burst out into a fit of giggles, raising his hand to cover his mouth and he laughed.

"You made a *document*?"

Clay flushed. "It's good to keep things organised."

"Wow, I've really been missing out, huh." George straightened himself up in his chair. "I mean, I'd love to stay and look at the document with you, but I need to go have a talk with my mum about this."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm gonna be able to go, I just want to let her know what happened, that's all."

Clay nodded, then, realising George couldn't see him, gave a verbal confirmation. "I need to tidy anyway, so I should probably go."

"Can we call back this evening?" George asked.

"To go over the *document*."

"Sure."

"Sounds good then." A smile was spreading over Clay's face, and for the first time in a while, he felt hope blossom in his chest. Maybe the trip wouldn't be all that he'd planned, but it was still going to be fun, he'd make sure of it.

"Catch you later than, Dream."

"Ah, better get used to calling me Clay." He grinned. "Or you could just refer to me as darling. Or sweetheart. Or bab-"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, *Clay*." George spoke in an irritated tone, but there was a smile dancing across his face. "Good-bye, dear."

"Bye." Clay drew out the word in a laugh before pausing, his face growing sombre. "George."

"Mhmm."

"I'm glad you're coming. I really am."

George gave another smile, a sweet one that curled around the corners of his mouth and made his eyes crinkle up, hiding in their sockets. For a moment, Clay thought he would respond, but then the call ended and he was left with nothing but silence.

Clay sat at his desk a moment longer, before getting leisurely to his feet, only to twist around and flop onto his bed. He moved to curl around his sleeping cat, but the movement onto the bed had already awoken her. She opened a single lazy eye to look at him and Clay gave her a small smile. "Hey there. Sorry for disturbing you." She offered him nothing but a languid yawn, her jaw stretching wide and her ears folding back into her head. Clay continued speaking to her, desperate to share his thoughts. "I guess that's all sorted then, huh." He let out a heavy sigh. "Got nothing to worry about. George came in clutch." Clay let a small laugh fall from his lips, amused by his unironic use of the word. Patches began moving again, her small feet bunching up the blankets as she moved to curl up against Clay's chest. "Hey there you." Clay looked down at his cat fondly. "I'm gonna miss you, you know that. I'll leave some clothes out on the bed, so you can come snuggle whenever you want. Just no pooping on the floor, okay?" Patches yawned, tucking her head down into her owner's torso. Clay swallowed, a lump building in his throat. "I love you, y'know that." He ran a shaky hand across her dense fur, feeling, rather than hearing her subtle purr. "Sometimes I get so caught up in the little things, but I've got so many great people in my life. And," Clay leant over to murmur into Patches' ear. "One great cat." She, unsurprisingly, gave no reply, merely cocking her head at the sound of his voice. He gave another small laugh, before sprawling back down onto the comfort of his bed. "This is gonna be good." His eyes traced patterns on his ceiling as he felt his excitement grow. With one hand still buried in the fur of his cat, he whispered to himself. "Everything's going to be *okay*."

Uwu, touch down in Bali next chapter. Also, ik what you're thinking, couldn't we have gotten to this point with only like 8k words. Yes. Yes, we could've. But where's the fun in that?

Anyways, thank y'all for reading, have a good one

Long Flights and Lost Minds

Chapter Notes

Before I begin, I just wanted to say thank you SO MUCH for all the support. The last chpt just blew up so hello to all the new readers!!!

As always, thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay's plane landed sometime after noon. Time had become a muggy, mysterious thing and by the time he stumbled into the crowd of the airport he'd lost all sense of reality. He stood, alone, in the baggage claim area, letting himself be pushed this way and that by the waves of people all around. The flight had lasted sixteen, agonising hours. He'd never had terrible anxiety on planes, but there was something about being stuck in the same place for hours on end that had just worn him down. He'd tried to be productive. He had done some writing, watched a movie, had a nap. However, most of his time had been spent staring blankly at the seat in front of him, listening to the same song on repeat and letting his thoughts race. Clay's hand gripped onto the strap of his rucksack, the knuckles turning white as the swell of voices around him reached a cacophony.

Once Clay had managed to snag his suitcase off of the conveyor belt he made his way out into the main body of the airport. The tall glass ceiling made him feel dizzy as he stared up into it, his worn trainers scuffing against the polished floor. Clay felt silently grateful for his decision to wear sweatpants on the plane. It was just an airport after all, and his jeans would have been stiff with sweat at this point. He caught his reflection in the glossy glass of a window and had to refrain from shuddering. His hair was curled in a twisted tangle, his eyes looked even more deep-set than usual with the heavy bags underneath them. Clay didn't feel that tired, but he knew he must be. He hadn't slept properly in weeks, a mixture of nerves and relentless work keeping him up till the early hours of the morning. He shook his head slightly, trying to keep his thoughts together with his head relentlessly pounding.

Clay's eyes scoured over vast space of the airport, catching on the bright advertisements and slogans, all in a language he didn't understand. His flight had landed a little later than expected, meaning he only had two hours to kill. With his lone suitcase firmly grasped in his hand, his tattered rucksack slung across his back, he set off in search of the nearest map of the airport. Whilst he couldn't leave the premises, as he had no visa, there was plenty to entertain himself with until George's plane landed at three.

Clay's first stop was a small cafe, tucked into the corner of the second floor of the airport. Thankfully, the women behind the counter spoke English, and he was to buy an outrageously expensive lunch. He sat in the corner of the shop, chewing at his food while tapping out a message to his family, reassuring them that all was well, and he hadn't died in a freak aeroplane accident. With a pang, Clay remembered saying goodbye to them, all those hours ago. It hadn't been *that* long, but it felt like he hadn't seen his family in days. His younger brother and sister had hugged

him so tightly, and even though they were only teens, he never questioned if they understood what he was doing. Emily, his older sister had been so resigned, hanging back from him. Clay remembered the anger in her eyes, but she had still held him close and murmured reassurance in his ear. His parents had been the same. He knew they all wished he wasn't going, but they'd come to terms with his decision a long time ago and was too late to turn back now. Arguably the hardest goodbye had been from Patches. She didn't understand he was leaving, going away for a whole month. She hadn't known it was coming, didn't understand the suitcase in the hallway or the emptiness of Clay's bedroom. He remembered her yowling at the door when Clay left for the airport. He had gotten an uber. He knew if his family had dropped him off he would have never left the car.

Clay turned his head towards the wall, away from the other people in the cafe, trying to hide the tears that were pricking at his eyes. He wasn't ashamed of showing his emotions, never had been, but it was a very public place and he knew if he started crying he'd never stop. Clay's fist clenched on the table as he remembered the feeling of Patches fur in his hands, her tiny body curled up against his chest. His brother's warm smile, his mother's hand on his cheek. He sniffed loudly, dragging the cuff of his hoodie roughly across his eyes. There would be a time for this, later, when he was tucked under the blankets of his bed and it was too dark to see the tears that streaked across his cheeks, but for now, he needed to eat his food and think about other things.

Clay took a deep breath in, dropping his shoulders and unclenching his teeth, feeling some of the tension leave his body as he forced himself to relax. He pushed his mind towards the positive thoughts, mulling over what had gone right thus far. Firstly, everything was going according to plan. The bulk of his journey was over, and while he would still have to see Hannah that was around twenty hours away, and he'd be seeing George far sooner. Clay took a moment to think of his friend, and felt a swell of gratefulness furl in his chest. George had kept his word, memorising all the times, dates and intricate details of Clay's story. The past few frantic days were reminiscent of that before an exam, with the pair constantly quizzing each other. *How long did you like me before we started dating? When did we first kiss? How did you tell your parents?* Of course, it wasn't as flawless as the charade he and Nick had formed, but all things considered, he was proud of their progress. He reckoned Hannah would buy it, and that was the important thing. That's what they were all doing it for.

Clay listened to the soft lo-fi music that was sweeping through the cafe. Most of the tables were empty now, and even the airport outside looked quiet. He let his thoughts drift back to George, musing over all that happened in the past week. Whilst he hadn't known George anywhere near as long as Nick, the performance they were constructing didn't feel uncomfortable. They had both kept communications clear and he felt confident that the next month wouldn't impact their friendship. Clay still felt a little curious as to why George had been so adamant about coming with him. He believed that George did, earnestly, want to help him, but he also suspected that Nick had said something to persuade the other man. Clay felt a spark of curiosity as he wondered what Nick could have told George. Did he only tell him about his Grandma, and was enough? Or was there more?

With a heavy sigh, Clay swept the rubbish off his table, depositing it in the nearby bin. The women

behind the counter shot him a smile as he left the store, and he smiled back at her, his feet dragging along the smooth floor as he made his way onto the main floor of the airport. Clay was surprised by how much time had passed whilst he was sitting in the shop. He felt a lot better than he had when he'd first landed, the food had likely calmed his nerves and the change of scene was a welcome sight. Clay walked swiftly, but without any true direction letting his feet take him wherever they pleased. The reality of the situation seemed, at last, to be settling in. It was easy to gloss over the truth of what he was doing when he was still at home in Florida, but now he was halfway to Bali there was no choice but to comprehend the situation. It still seemed unbelievable, the string of mistakes that had brought him to a holiday with his best friend, or pseudo boyfriend. Clay wanted to laugh. His first-ever boyfriend and it was all fake. All an act because he was stupid and petty and prone to running his mouth like a fucking child.

Clay paused, looking down into the sprawling mass of the airport. It was a glorified mall, yet there was a certain cold beauty in it. He let his eyes linger on the faces of the people as they rushed past each other, unaware of the young man watching them from above. He wondered who those people were, wondered if their stories were anywhere near as wild as his. He would never see these people again, yet there they were in front of him, in this strange moment in time, acting as the backdrop to his tidal wave of thoughts.

For the next hour, Clay let himself walk. Strolling up and down the glossy floors, his suitcase at his heels. He took elevators up then elevators down, letting himself get lost in the sprawl of the building, then making his way back to the centre. It was calming, after being trapped on a plane for so long, to be able to let himself be free. By the time it was close to three, Clay felt genuinely excited for the first time. He trekked his way over to terminal two, in preparation for the flight with George to land. As he walked over to baggage claims, he thought back to the last time the pair had met. He'd seen George only twice in person. Once when Clay had flown over for a weekend in England to see relatives, and another time, earlier this year, again in England. They had never met away from George's home turf, and never for as long of a time as they were planning to spend in Bali. Clay bit at his lip nervously, trying to plan out what he would even say to George. Would they hug? They'd hugged last time. He remembered how short George was, his head fitting just under the curve of his throat and he bit back a smile. His hands worried themselves on the handle of his case, but it was only butterflies. *It's gonna be okay*. Clay reassured himself, again and again.

George's plane was on time. The screen on the wall told him the plane landed at three, and by quarter past, the hordes of people began flooding into baggage claims. Clay had been one of the few people lurking in the corners and he instantly became overwhelmed. He stood, alone looking frantically out over the sea of heads, trying to catch a glimpse of George. He had no clue what his friend was even wearing, no idea what to look for. He craned his neck this way and that as the crowd began to thin, then, at last, he saw him. Standing forlornly next to a tall lady wearing sunglasses and a bald man in a tan jacket. The face that had lit up his computer screen for years. A smile crept across Clay's face as he began shouldering his way over, raising a hand to catch his friend's attention. "George!"

George looked up, caught sight of him, then began wading through the crowd, giving an answering cry of greeting. Clay couldn't stop the smile from spreading even further across his cheeks as he dragged his case, anxious to reach his friend.

At last, he reached his side and they stood, letting the bustling people flow around them their eyes locked on each other. Clay felt strangely nervous, the goofy smile was still on his face but his heart felt as though it was about to pound out of his chest. George hovered awkwardly, his hands teasing at the cuffs of his hoodie. "Hi." He said, his voice soft and shy, the British accent even more prominent than usual. Clay let out an exasperated chuckle, before stepping forward to scoop his friend up in his arms. Their bodies slotted together, George's head tucking oh-so neatly into his neck and for a moment it felt as though they had never left each other's arms.

"It's so good to see you." Clay murmured. George's hair tickled his cheek as he rested his head on top of his friends.

At long last, they stepped apart breaking off the hug. Clay's arms fell to hang by his sides and he flashed another smile at George, who grinned shyly up at him.

"Hey there," Clay said. "How was your flight?"

"It was terrible." George stepped towards him, pulling him back into a hug. "But it's nice to finally be able to hold you again."

Clay let his hands rest on his friend's back, letting a smile spread across his face, warmth blossom in his chest. "I've missed you too."

Their corner of baggage claims was gradually emptying, so Clay didn't feel too guilty lingering in George's arms. It felt unbelievably good to be able to touch him, to not only hear his voice match with the movement of his lips but to know if he wanted to he could reach out and touch the mouth spoke. Could hold his hand, pull him into a hug whenever he wanted. Clay breathed, deep slow and heavy, taking in the smell of his friend, of cheap shampoo, fabric softener and the acidic undertone of sweat. When they stopped apart again, Clay studied George's face, taking note of the bags under his eyes and the pallor of his skin.

"What?" George asked, shifting self consciously under the scrutiny.

"Nothing," Clay smiled gently, deciding not to comment on George's weariness. "It's always just so weird when we meet up, being reminded that you're a real person."

"See." George reached out a hand and poked Clay's side. "Very real."

They shared another laugh as Clay slung an arm around George's shoulders. "Have you gotten shorter?" He asked with another light chuckle.

"Dickhead." George dodged out from under the arm. "When was the last time you got a haircut?"

Clay ran a hand self consciously through his mop of hair. "When was the last time you shaved?"

George blushed at that, before running his fingers nervously over the heavy veneer of stubble, scattered over his jaw, dark against the pale skin. He glared up at Clay, pouting slightly. "I woke up late, okay."

"It adds to the whole homeless vibe, very nice."

George scowled, stomping back over to his suitcase, which Clay hadn't noticed before. He let out a loud laugh, raising an arm to point at the luggage. "Why the fuck is it so *big* ." He wheezed, almost doubling over at the cartoonish size. "Go stand next to it, it's like up to your fucking *waist* ." Clay let out another shout of laughter, so loud that the people around him began to look over.

"I'm going to be away for a month!" George looked affronted as he stood next to the enormous case. "Oh my *god* ."

But Clay had already bent over again, laughing so hard he felt dizzy. "It's so *big* ."

George let the corner of his mouth twitch up in a smile before his brows drew together and he rolled his eyes. "You're so stupid."

Clay gasped as he caught his breath, straightening up again and trying to rearrange his features into a more sombre mask. "How many hoodies do you *need* ."

"It's not just hoodies. I've got my gaming laptop, my mouse, my headse-"

"It's a *holiday* ." Clay sighed. "You're ridiculous." He reached out to grab the handle of his own significantly smaller case. "God I've been walking around this airport so long I feel *delirious* ."

"Well we need to go check-in, then after that, you can sit down." George dug his phone out of his pocket, turning it on with a press of his thumb. "Do you think we'll have time to eat?"

"We should."

"Good, I want McDonalds."

Clay chuckled. "You always want McDonalds."

They continued teasing each other on the way to check-ins and security. Clay felt so comfortable with George. There was no warm-up conversation, no awkward stagnancy. They traded jokes and laughs just like they did online, the only difference was Clay could reach over and shove George if he said anything too outrageous. They continued trading quips and light conversation until they reached a McDonalds on the third floor. George got his food then they settled down at a greasy table near the back of the restaurant.

"I honestly can't believe you," Clay said, his fingers tearing at the wrapper of George's straw. "You eat McDonalds in England all the time. Can't you spice it up a bit?"

George looked at him stoutly from around his chicken burger. "No." His voice was muffled, his mouth full of food and Clay laughed at him again. Not because it was funny but because he just felt so happy to be around George again. It was all so different in person. So much *better* .

"Your head looks weird without your headset." Clay said suddenly.

"You're so kind." George giggled around the straw of his drink. "Is it frightfully scary not being able to hide your face whenever you want?"

Clay smiled. "I don't mind, but only because it's *you* ." He laughed, struck by a sudden thought. "If

a fan comes up to us, can you just pretend I'm some random tourist who's sitting at your table?"

"I could do that," George mused. "But what would be in it for me?"

"You get to keep your bragging rights that you're part of a minority who's seen my face."

"True," George was still absentmindedly chewing at his food, weighing up the pros and cons. "But it'd be a really funny story."

"You're so mean to me." Clay pouted.

The pair fell into silence once more, George still chewing resolutely through the meal in front of him. He finished up his chicken burger, then fixed Clay with a withering stare. "I've been meaning to ask." George gestured pointing a fry at Clay in a worryingly aggressive way. "How do you feel about seeing Hannah?"

Clay shifted in his seat, deliberately avoiding George's eyes. "Aren't you supposed to build up to that?"

George scowled at him. "Just answer the question."

"Well," Clay drew out the word, buying time. "She's already in Bali, her plane landed at around one."

George's scowl deepened. "I don't care. Why would I care about that?"

"Well, you asked about Hannah."

"No," George spoke firmly, still waving his fry around. "I asked about *you*. Stop dodging the question."

"Okay, fine. I feel shitty about Hannah and I'll be fucking lucky if I don't have a breakdown the second I see her. I haven't slept properly in weeks, I don't even know who I am anymore. I keep thinking I'm fine with this crappy situation, but I'm not. I won't be until it's over."

George sighed. "I'm shitty at this kind of thing, but know I'm here. I'm always gonna be here. And Nick's only a call away."

Clay nodded. "I know."

George paused, then continued speaking, his voice fast. "I just don't fucking get it. You usually don't care. You always make such a big fucking deal about how you don't get nervous and how you don't care what other people think of you." George motioned wildly toward Clay. "But look at you. You're a mess. It's like you want her to tread all over you again."

Clay buried his head in hands, letting out a heavy groan. "Just give me a *break*."

"I just don't get it."

"Come on George." Clay looked at his friend, a silent plea in his eyes. "You know what that whole relationship did to me."

"Yeah, I was *there*." George's nostrils flared. "You've had nine months though Clay, nine months."

"You don't *understand*. You've never *had* a relationship like that."

“Okay, then tell me.” George was visibly frustrated as he stared Clay down. “*Explain* to me, rather than holding my ignorance over my head.”

“Can we not argue right now. Please.” Clay ran his fingers through his hair again. His headache was coming back. “We’re both tired and grumpy and I can’t unpack this right now.”

George nodded. “That’s okay.” His voice lowered. “And I’m sorry for jumping down your throat. Just this is gonna work best if we’re both on the same page.”

“I know. And I’m sorry for being so out of it.”

“It’s not about *that* .” George looked as though he were about to say more than stopped himself. “But thank you.”

He went back to eating, stuffing his mouth with food and Clay let his eyes drift around the restaurant place. It was so much cleaner than the ones they had in America, and the lit-up menus seemed so much more interesting. Clay turned back to George, clearing his throat. “What did Sapnap say to you by the way?” He asked, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. George turned to look at him, mouth still full, head tilted in curiosity.

“Like, when he called you. The night he found out about his Grandma.”

“Uhm.” George looked a little startled at the question and Clay felt his intrigue grow. “Not much. Just caught me up on the details, told me I should probably go, instead of him.”

Clay opened his mouth, about to ask a follow-up question, but George cut him off.

“It’s good to hear his Grandma’s doing alright now.”

“Yeah, I felt so worried for Sap’s family.” Nick had called them both a few days ago from his grandparents’ house, letting them know that his Gran was going to pull through and that all was well. Clay had been so relieved to get that call, to know he could go off to Bali without constantly fearing for his friend.

“Do they know what happened yet?” George asked.

“They probably won’t for a while. And even if they do, the treatment might be too expensive to justify going through with.”

George wrinkled his nose. “Goddamn American healthcare. Hopefully, it was just a one-time freak illness or something.”

“I don’t know enough to make a guess.” Clay sighed. “And even if I did, I understand computers far better than people.”

“I don’t mind that.” George seemed a little shy as he spoke. “I want you to know that I *am* looking forward to spending time with you in person.” He looked down at the table, his hands tracing patterns on the chipboard. “Like, we had that week when you flew over this year but that wasn’t the same. I know this is serious, and will probably end up being a negative experience for you, but I’m genuinely excited to spend some time together.” George was mumbling now, as though trying to swallow his words before they fell from his lips.

Clay reached out, almost inadvertently and grasped George’s hand, linking their fingers together. “I’m excited to spend time with you too. It’s a little annoying that the first time I get to properly be

with my best friend is in these shitty circumstances, but we'll make it fun."

George finally brought his head back up, meeting Clay's eyes with a smile. "You know you don't have to make it fun. I'm happy to be here. For you."

"Thank you." Clay swallowed. "That means a lot."

They stayed for a long time in the McDonalds, then walked together to their flight, shoulders bumping up against each other, enjoying each others company. They didn't part ways until they were in the aeroplane. Clay squeezed his friend's hand in a wordless goodbye as George left to go take his seat at the back. It would've been nice to sit together, but George had booked far too late. He had been lucky to even get a seat. Clay had managed to snag an aisle seat, all those months ago when he'd booked. The two passengers were already sat down, so he stowed his bag in the cubby above and settled into the cramped seat. The lady next to him was fidgeting, adjusting the layers of her wool jumper and crossing and uncrossing her legs restlessly. She smelt of expensive perfume and the heavy aroma made Clay feel a little sick. He turned away from her pushing his feet slightly out into the aisle. His height was always a disadvantage while flying and he was grateful he'd managed to scrounge a little extra room for his legs. Clay turned to look behind him, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of George, but he couldn't see him.

Clay leant back in his seat again, his eyes flicking over the tall ceiling of the plane. He hated it all. The dull blue carpet, the quiet chatter from all around as people tried to fit into seats that were far too small for them. With a sigh, Clay plugged in his headphones, settling back, apprehension beginning to twist inside him once more. It would be a long flight but he dreaded, far more, the time when it would be over.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, my dear readers with impeccable taste. Thank you for all ur wonderful comments and kudos (and the little notes u leave when bookmarking, they're fun too), please go say more nice things to me over on twitter- [@LolaLikes](#) (or just follow me, that works too

Late Night Reunions

Chapter Notes

Consider this ur belated xmas present o(¬¬) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was eleven o'clock when the plane finally landed. A dim, cold eleven o'clock, that saw the city of Denspar aglow with harsh electric lights, not a remnant of sunlight even visible on the horizon. Clay and George managed to get a taxi that would take them from the airport to the rented house. The driver had spoken broken English as Clay read the address off of his phone, and George lingered on the pavement, clutching his luggage like a lost child. Clay had spent the bulk of the journey flicking his phone on and off, anxiously checking the time, looking to see if anyone had messaged him. He would glance at the screen, letting light spill into the car, blinding his eyes, before flicking it off again to stare blankly at the seat in front of him. He'd ended up stuffing his phone into the pocket of his hoodie, forcing himself to abandon the ritual.

Clay estimated that they were about fifteen minutes away now. Fifteen minutes away from Hannah. Hannah and her sweet smile, the way her eyes would slide half shut and the left corner of her mouth would rise a little higher every time she grinned. Hannah and her voice, tinged with a gentle east coast accent. The way she said her vowels with that honeyed cadence, ending sentences with a bubbling laugh. How would he be able to stand in front of her, speak to her, with a steady voice and a stoic face? *What do you say to someone who you used to love?*

Clay dragged his hands roughly through his hair, forcing his thoughts from Hannah, turning instead to look at George, who was sat in the seat next to him. His head was lolling back, shoulders lax, his eyes shut. Clay didn't know if he was asleep or not. The lights of the city illuminated his face in ghostly ways casting deep shadows over his sharp collarbones and the curve of his jaw. Clay watched him, his eyes lingering on the shapes of George's face, mapping out every pale inch of skin.

He hoped this trip would bring the two of them closer together. It was sad to think that if you told Clay a month ago he would get to spend this much time with his best friend, he would have been delighted, but this whole sequence of events had left a nasty taste in his mouth and he knew George still hadn't quite forgiven him for his behaviour. There was sometimes a coolness in his eyes when he looked at Clay, as though an invisible wall had been built up by their argument. Well, less of an argument, more of a cold disagreement. George wasn't one for hot-blooded shouting matches, unlike Clay, who liked to fight. He felt a sense of control in the way he could out-talk people, taking them down with a handful of well-chosen words. The way George fought meant there was very rarely that sense of regret that came with an argument, but it also meant his friend would often stew on ideas inside his head instead of telling Clay what was wrong. Clay liked to know what was wrong. Liked to understand what was going on inside someone's mind, and feeling like he was losing that mental synchronisation with George had hurt.

George stirred, shifting his head away from the window as though he had sensed how hard Clay was thinking about him. He turned, meeting Clay's eyes, and the pair stared at each other in a wordless stalemate. George's hand crept across the seat to where Clay's palm rested.

"It's going to be okay." He whispered, as though he knew all that his friend had been worrying about.

"Thank you." Clay whispered back. But the words of reassurance had done nothing other than stoke the guilt, that was creeping into his stomach.

They held hands until the car pulled up to the front of the house. It was tucked into a swathe of vegetation, peering out at them with glowing windows and pale walls. As soon as the car was parked, the two of them stumbled out, Clay staying to tip the driver while George lifted the cases out of the trunk, struggling under the weight of them. The lights in the windows confirmed Clay's fear that the other residents had stayed up to wait for them. He knew it was inevitable, but he didn't *want* to see Hannah now. Not when he was so sleep-deprived and still dressed in the same sweatpants he had worn for two flights.

Clay walked around the car to help George with the luggage, before stepping back from the vehicle to watch it drive away, leaving them at the house. Clay turned to George, looking down at him. His friend was nothing but a gloomy figure in the dark of the night, his hair casting long shadows over his brow.

"Shall we?" He asked, gesturing up to the house.

George nodded mutely, likely too tired to bother speaking. When they began walking, Clay was sure to pick George's luggage off the ground, so the smaller man didn't have to struggle with the heavier suitcase.

When at last they got to the door, Clay raised a hesitant hand to the doorbell, his fingers hovering over the button.

"Clay...?" George's face was washed by the glow of the porch light, his eyes uncertain as he gazed up at Clay.

Clay swallowed, a lump building in his throat. He was too tired to pretend he didn't care anymore, too tired to pretend this wasn't hard. "I don't want to see her." His voice was soft, vulnerable as he whispered his confession.

"It's going to be okay."

"How can it be?" Clay asked, his hand still trembling above the doorbell.

The pair looked at each other, and Clay, for half a moment wanted to suggest calling the taxi back, staying in a hotel for the night. To do anything and everything he could to run away from the inescapable.

Then, there came a rustling from behind the door, as the handle turned, the hinged creaking as it opened.

“Clay!”

Clay let a smile cross his face as he held out his arms to embrace the young man that stood on the threshold.

“Scott! It’s so good to see you!”

“Fuck, it’s been *months* . Have you grown?” Scott raised a hand to Clay’s forehead, dipping it up and down to measure the difference in height between the two of them. “You’ve *totally* grown.”

A laugh spilt from Clay’s lips. “You’re *so* funny.” He squeezed his friend’s shoulders. “I’ve missed you, man.”

“Yeh, me too.” Scott grinned. “We’ve got the whole month to catch up though!”

“I can’t wait.” Clay smiled back at him, then with a start, remembered George, who was hanging away from the door. “Scott,” Clay swung an arm behind him, gesturing to his friend. “I’d like you to meet George.” Clay swallowed, the words heavy on his tongue. “My boyfriend.”

“It’s great to meet you.” Scott leaned over to shake George’s hand, a warm smile on his face.

“Likewise.” George smiled. His shyness was audible, even with a single word.

“Hannah told me you were dating someone.” Scott looked back to Clay. “I’m happy for you two, I really am.”

“Thank you.” Clay murmured.

They lingered for a moment, listening to the silence of the night, before Scott spoke. “Listen,” He said, arching his back in a small stretch. “I’d love to talk now, but I’m tired as hell.”

“Me too, almost thirty hours of flying.” Clay yawned. “I’m done for.”

“Fuck.” Scott sighed. “Ana and I stayed in Dubai for a couple of days so it was only around sixteen for me. Was a bitch to get insurance, but worth it.” Scott turned to George. “Ana’s my girlfriend.”

“I know, Clay told me.” George smiled back at him. “I got a tour of all the couple photos on Facebook, don’t worry.”

Clay laughed. “I just wanted to make sure you knew what they looked like.” He turned to Scott. “It wasn’t creepy, I promise.”

The three of them made their way into the house, Clay ducking his head to fit under the porch. While George and Scott made light conversation about their flights, Clay fell back, savouring the brief wave of joy he felt at seeing his friend again.

The house was just as he remembered it from the photos and carried that strange feeling that empty spaces always held. A feeling of still air and unusual echoes, as though the very building was aware of its loneliness. The short hallway of the porch led straight into the living room. It was spacious, yet cosy, with soft cream couches and a rustic fireplace. On the seat closest to them was

a small figure, curled up around a cushion. Clay knew immediately it wasn't Hannah, from the sleek black hair spilling across the woman's face. She rolled over, as the three of them came in and Clay realised it was Anaya. He held out her arms as she got to her feet, and they shared a brief hug, her slender arms wrapping tightly around his torso, her head barely coming to his chest. It was clear from her heavy-lidded eyes that she was tired, yet she still smiled at Clay, offering him a drowsy greeting.

"It's good to see you." Clay murmured, as she slipped from his arms to go speak to Scott and George.

Now that Anaya was gone, he had no choice but to look for Hannah. He caught sight of her instantly, lurking by the far end of the living room, near where it joined with the kitchen. She looked almost the same, dressed, as she always used to be, in jeans and a loose hoodie. The dim light of the living room caught on her hair, turning it into a sheet of liquid gold, hanging over her face. Clay could see her hands twisting themselves in knots. *Is she nervous? Scared? Does it matter?* His thoughts skipped along as he forced himself to move towards her, glancing briefly behind to look at George, to meet the dark eyes of his friend. He stalled, a few feet away from Hannah, acutely aware of everyone staring at him. The awkwardness was tangible, neither of them daring to speak first.

Hannah broke the silence. "Hey there." She said, quietly

"Hello." Clay's voice was gravelly as he responded and he couldn't quite bring himself to meet her eyes.

"Leo's already gone to bed, but I wanted to stay up to give you your keys." Clay's jaw tensed. *Leo. The new boyfriend.*

Hannah stumbled on. "I wanted to make sure you got here safely as well."

"Thank you, the flight got a little delayed, but it was alright." Clay's eyes traced patterns in the wood floor, dancing around the corner of the kitchen he could see, then back round to the sofas, the panelled walls.

What do you say to someone who you used to love? Someone who you fell for, slowly, gradually, cautiously, but helplessly all the same. How do you reconcile with that closeness, how do you look them in the eyes when they'd seen every part of you? When they'd unravelled your mind and body alike, laid every inch of you bare. It felt impossibly wrong to stand with such space between the two of them when they'd spent so many nights wrapped in each other's arms. Wrong to have welcomed them with a "Hello.", to offer them nothing but tired eyes and awkward silences.

"We turned the AC on in your room. It's the one at the far end of the hallway, near the back of the house." Hannah cleared her throat, then moved to fish a handful of keys out of the pocket of her jeans. "There are two keys for the front door, two for your room and one for the garage." She spoke quickly, the words tripping over each other and Clay wondered it was just fatigue or if she was as anxious as he was. He held out his right hand and her fingers brushing against his as she set

the keys into his outstretched palm.

“Thank you.” Clay couldn’t say anything else. He felt as though his voice would crack and he’d crumble if he tried to express anything other than shallow gratitude. He felt George move up to stand beside him, slipping his hand wordlessly into Clay’s left hand, the one still hanging down by his side. The feeling of George’s fingers intertwining with his seemed to calm him down, and he finally raised his head to meet Hannah’s gaze. Her eyes had always been beautiful. They shone a clear blue and glittered when she laughed. He knew how they looked half shut in the morning, how they glimmered glossy with tears, how they furled shut in ecstasy. But those same eyes were looking at him now, guarded and cold. A stranger’s eyes.

George spoke from beside him, his voice a melodic mumble. “Thank you for sorting everything out, we appreciate it.” Clay felt George squeeze at his hand. He squeezed back, their fingers clasped neatly together in a wordless display of unity.

Hannah dragged her eyes away from Clay to look at George, giving him a tired smile. “It’s quite alright.” She sighed. “Most of the work was already done by the landlord.”

Hannah gave a quiet lilting laugh. Clay knew that laugh. It was the one she used to fill silences, to camouflage awkward moments. It felt wrong to know that. Wrong to be able to read a stranger in the way he could read Hannah.

She sighed again, “I’m probably going to head to bed now.” She ran her fingers through her hair, twisting the silky strands. “I’m still pretty jetlagged.”

“It was good to see you.” Clay said, his words hollow.

George’s grip on his hand tightened again, “Yeh, nice meeting you.” He murmured.

Clay didn’t know if he was imagining things, but he could’ve sworn there was an edge of hostility to George’s voice, a bite to his words.

“Thank you,” Hannah smiled. “Hopefully we’ll be able to catch up tomorrow.” She nodded at George. “Get to know each other.”

Clay spared a glance to George again, noting his clenched jaw. “Sounds good.” He replied. “Sleep well.”

“You too.” Hannah said, before turning, walking out of the room with a swish of her hair.

Clay’s shoulders dropped as he felt himself relax, his muscles untensing as she disappeared down the hall.

“That was interesting.” George whispered, his breath ghosting across Clay’s neck.

Clay hummed in response, moving to face the rest of the room, meeting the stares of his friends. Anaya had been silent this whole time, but she spoke now, her dark eyes serious as she gazed empathetically at Clay. “Are you alright with all of this?”

Clay bit his lip. “It’s fine. Like, I’ve had nine months to get over her. It’s manageable.”

"It's okay if it's not." Scott spoke from beside his girlfriend, his voice sincere.

"It is." Clay tried to sound as reassuring as possible. "I think I'm just tired at the minute."

"Me too." George slowly dropped Clay's hand, untangling their fingers to walk over to where they had left their cases. Clay tried to ignore the way he missed the contact. "You want to head to bed, Clay?"

Clay hummed in agreement, walking to the luggage as well.

"Yeh, we should go to sleep as well." Scott scrutinised Clay for a moment more, before holding his hand out to Anaya. She took it and they both walked out of the room with a soft "Goodnight."

Now that they were alone, Clay let his smile fall from his face, sighing as he picked up the luggage.

"How long have you known Scott again?" George asked.

"Since middle school."

"And you're still lying to him?"

"Piss off." Clay rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to fall on him sobbing after seeing him for the first time in months. I'm sure we'll talk about our feelings, but now really isn't the time."

Clay saw George's jaw tense again, so he hastily continued talking. "I thought you were tired, anyway."

"I am."

"So..." Clay dangled the bedroom keys in the air.

"Fine."

The two of them made their way wordlessly along the hallway, dragging their feet until they reached the room at the very end. The door was ajar, and Clay pushed it open, a little hesitantly, before flicking on the light. The bedroom was huge, dominated by a large double bed and furnished with dark wood. There was a pair of french windows at one end, leading out to a small patio, as well as a wardrobe, chairs and a soft white rug on the floor. It was like something out of an IKEA catalogue, clean and coordinated, yet bland, with little soul.

"This is nice." George said.

"I guess." Clay walked over to the en suite, peering inside. It was a cold, white and chrome affair, with a large shower and double sinks.

"I kind of forgot there'd be only one bed..."

Clay poked his head out of the bathroom to stare incredulously at his friend. "Forgot?"

"I'm fine with it," George said hastily. "I just..."

The pair scrutinised each other for a moment, staring from across the room.

“I’m sorry.” Clay murmured.

George shrugged, not even bothering to ask what he was apologising for. “I offered to come, remember.”

The two of them lingered in the silence a moment longer, the weight of unspoken words heavy in the air.

Clay swallowed, his hand darting up to awkwardly fuss at his hair. “Do you want to shower?” He asked.

“Not right now, if that’s okay. I just want to go to sleep.” George pushed the suitcase a little tighter against the wall, then tugged off his hoodie, revealing the baggy shirt he wore underneath. “I don’t even want to get changed, to be honest.”

“Sounds good to me.” Clay toed off his worn shoes, shucking his socks as well and leaving it all in a heap on the hardwood floor. “Do you want the left side, or right?”

“Don’t mind.” George said, throwing his hoodie on top of his closed suitcase.

Clay walked around the bed, settling down on the left side, facing the french windows. The foliage outside was nothing but a dark outline, stark against the moonlit sky as it rippled gently in the stagnant air. He rolled over, lying on top of the tucked-in covers, tilting his head to look at George, who was sitting in one of the chairs, still peeling off his socks. Clay watched him, studying the way his fingers moved, how the bones jutted out under the pale skin.

“Come to bed, dear.” Clay’s voice came mainly from his chest, barely more than a tired grumble.

“Shut up.” George let a huff, half laugh half sigh, the bed dipping as he settled onto it. “God this bed is huge.”

“I’m glad.” Clay murmured.

“Yeh, you probably smell *awful* .”

Clay gave a small giggle. It was oddly comforting having George’s presence beside him, in a way he hadn’t expected. To know if he rolled over, his friend would be there, it made Clay’s chest glow.

“I am sorry about all of this.” He whispered.

“I’m sure we’ll get used to it.” George’s voice was almost unintelligible, his tired tongue skipping consonants.

Clay laid back, closing his eyes. “You never know, it might even be fun.”

George gave another sigh-laugh. “Perhaps.” His voice dripped in sarcasm.

They lay in silence for a moment listening to the soft creaks of the unfamiliar house. Insects were chirping, somewhere deep in the forest and it was oddly similar to the noises Clay heard back home, in Florida. A familiar sound, half the world away.

“Well then,” George whispered. “Goodnight, Clay.”

“Goodnight.” Clay smiled. “And George.”

“Hmm.”

“If you wake up before me tomorrow, don’t you dare disturb me or I’ll break your arm.”

“Ditto.”

George turned, his back to him and a heavy silence fell on the room. Clay lay still, his eyes wide, gazing through the crack in the curtains. It didn’t take long for George’s breathing to become regular and Clay felt his friend’s body relax beside him, the sheets shifting smoothly with the steady rise and fall of his chest. Clay turned away even further, curling up into himself, moving his long limbs to wrap around his torso. Then, at long last, after all the gruelling hours of busy airports, of long overdue hugs and stilted handshakes; of unforgiving flights and anxious overthinking. Clay, at long last, began to cry. His shoulders shook with silent sobs and the tears streaked down his cheeks, visible only by the wash of moonlight. His fists balled in the sheets and his teeth bit at his lips as he cried and cried.

Chapter End Notes

Ahem, genuine question, why the fuck does this fic have so much attention?? Y’all got banging taste, but like, did someone rec it? Are y’all just here naturally? Plz let me know, I need to know if I gotta go thank someone. Regardless, however you got here, thank you for reading all the same, ur affection is very much appreciated and I’m glad ur enjoying my work

p.s Follow me on Twitter- [@LolaLikes](#) (this is not a request, I crave clout)

Crossed Lines and Little Lies

Chapter Notes

Take my moderate simping over Bali and my major angst, take it and be happy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Consciousness came to Clay like a steady wave creeping up to shore. It coaxed him from sleep, prodding at his brain and pulling him back to cognisance, a fraction at a time. He became aware of cotton sheets grazing his fingertips, the stillness of the air and the smell of sweat hanging around him like a fog. Then, the dryness of his mouth, the heaviness in his limbs and a vicious headache pulsing in his temples, until, all at once, he was awake, and the first thought that crossed his mind was how desperate he was to fall back to sleep again.

His second thought was of last night, the panic, the resentment and the heavy tears that he'd finally let fall. He couldn't remember how long he'd cried for. Minutes and hours had felt the same in the quiet of the night and he'd had nothing to do except sob in self-pity listening to the even breaths of his friend beside him, oblivious in his sleep.

That brought Clay onto his third thought. George. With a heavy sigh, he forced his eyes open at last, flinching at the warm light flooding the room and turned his head to look at the other side of the bed. George was watching him with wide doe eyes, curled up on his side, huddled in the duvet. Clay blinked in surprise.

"How long have you been awake?" He asked, speaking in a gravelly whisper, as though worried about breaking the quiet of the house.

"Not long." George whispered back. His sweet voice was tinged with the roughness of morning, his accent even more prominent than usual. Clay had heard that tone before, in all the early calls they'd shared, but it took him by surprise how different it sounded in person. How different that sleepiness *looked* on George, with warm bleary-eyes, drowsy blinks and a soft mouth curled in a tender smile.

Clay blinked, chasing away both the dregs of sleep and the wave of fondness that had swept over him. "So you've just been watching me sleep, huh?"

"You *told* me to not wake you up," George whined. "I was threatened with acts of violence."

Clay chuckled, arching his back in a stretch, arms grazing across the expanse of crisp white sheets. "Wish I cared, honestly."

"I care," George mumbled. "And I'm hungry."

Clay bit back another laugh. "And what do you want me to do about that?"

“*Dream* .” George groaned.

“That’s not my name.”

“*Clay* .” George fixed him with a serious look. “Can we please get something to eat?”

Clay rolled over, resting his cheek on his forearm. “We can go to the restaurant down by the beach if you want. There’s probably no food in the house.”

George sighed as he turned over, rolling away from Clay to slide off the bed gracelessly. “I’m showering.” He said.

“That’s fine. I’ll go in there after you.” Clay raised his head off of the sheets to watch George moving about the room with restless energy. “What time is it?” There was a small scuffle as George rummaged around for his phone. “It’s almost one.” He murmured, his tone stained with surprise.

“*Fuck* .” Clay closed his eyes again, burying his face in his pillow. “We slept for *twelve hours* .” The bedding muffled his voice, as he groaned, the heaviness in his limbs making a lot more sense now. There came the distinctive sound of a suitcase zip, further rummaging and then the click of the bathroom door as it closed shut. Clay held back another smile. He’d never seen George this active after waking up and he made a mental note to tease him about it later.

With another heavy groan, Clay stumbled out of bed, missing the comforting cradle of the blankets the second his feet touched the cool floor. It felt odd to be so vulnerable in a place so unfamiliar. To wake up with sleep stained eyes and heavy limbs in a house he’d barely seen. The room held a heavy kind of stillness and the whole house was soaked in silence and something about the quiet atmosphere made Clay tread lightly, his bare feet making little sound as he made his way over to his suitcase. It sat in the corner of the room where he’d dumped it last night and Clay unzipped with clumsy fingers, rummaging through his piles of belongings.

Once he’d dug out everything he’d need for his shower, he opened the small pocket inside, digging out a heavy envelope. It was filled with brightly coloured bills and Clay began transferring them across to his battered leather wallet. It felt oddly grown-up, navigating his way around the foreign currency and his mind danced back to the fleeting memories he had of his parents doing the same thing, during all those holidays he’d had as a child.

Clay sat on the edge of the bed until the water stopped running and George, at long last, got out of the bathroom. His hair looked inky black when it was wet, a dripping tangle that curled around his face, matching the darkness of his eyes. Clay said nothing to him, merely scooping up his pile of clothes before making his way into the humid bathroom.

It wasn’t until he was under the hot spray of the water that Clay felt himself truly relax. The water soothed him as it raced down his back, each warm drop soothing his aching limbs, washing away faint remnants of salty tear tracks, days of sticky sweat in a steady stream of water. He took his

time under the hot spray, letting his eyes fall shut to revel in the heat and the clean smell of his shampoo. Without his sight, he could almost pretend he was home again and he clung to that snapshot of familiarity, aching for a sense of stability in this oh-so alien world.

George was staring blankly out of the window, not bothering to turn around when Clay left the bathroom. He had swept the curtains open, revealing the paradise lurking behind the glass. Lush vegetation framing a clear cerulean sky, a perfect image of rippling palms and bright birds flitting across the sky, snatched from a glossy travel brochure. *It doesn't look real.* Clay thought to himself. *People like me don't get to see places like this.*

With quiet steps and hushed murmurs, the pair of them made their way through the house and out the front door. Clay had tucked both his keys and his wallet into the pocket of his cargo shorts, so he locked the house up behind him. A precaution. He hadn't realised how stuffy the building was until they stepped outside, into the sweet humid air. It looked different in the light of day, the pale walls welcoming and fresh, rather than a ghostly threat. The gravel of the driveway crunched under their feet as they made their way across it, down towards a small path, leading away from the main entrance down towards the coast.

"The sea's like five minutes that way." Clay said, "And the restaurant's right by it."

George nodded. "Sounds good."

The path was little more than a rugged track, full of trampled dry vegetation and patches of sand and gravel. They walked in silence, side by side, arms bumping against each other with each stride they took. Clay's hair was still wet from the shower, and every now and again, and the edge of a cool breeze would flit through the undergrowth to send a chill across the wet strands, raising goosebumps on his arms.

After a while the dry branches began to peter out, giving way to soft white sand and Clay paused to slip off his sandals. They were old leather ones, likely bought from a Walmart, years ago and Clay felt a touch of relief as he buried his toes into the fine grains. George watched him with exasperation, arms folded and Clay shot a grin at him his sandals held loosely in his hand. "Problem?"

"Less than twenty-four hours and you're going full Tarzan?"

Clay ignored him, savouring the feeling of the dense sand against his feet, the cool breeze stirring the hair on his legs and the straps of his shoes digging into his fingers. Once again, he got that creeping feeling that this place was too perfect to be real. That he was in some complex dream and any moment he'd be jolted awake and taken back to the world he knew. That all these sights and sounds weren't *meant* to be something accessible to him.

They started walking again and George turned to him with a hesitant question.

"What kind of food do you think they'll have?"

“I don’t know,” Clay shrugged. “Traditional Bali stuff mostly.”

“Do you know any specifics?”

“No,” Clay looked at his friend, eyes squinting against the dappled patches of sunlight slipping through the trees. “Why do you ask?”

“I just...” George seemed a little embarrassed. “I googled some stuff before I left and this one site recommended these fried banana pancake things. I thought they looked nice.”

A laugh burst from Clay’s lips before he could stop it, a lilting rush of joy.

“What?” George scowled.

“Nothing,” Clay shook his head. “You’re just...” The word *cute* settled on his tongue, ready to be let loose and colour George’s cheeks with a gentle blush. He swallowed it.

“I’m just what?”

“I don’t know.” Clay sighed. “We can ask about the pancakes though.”

They only had to walk a little longer before the restaurant came into view. It was a sprawling building with a slumped tin roof and it stood half on the beach and half in the undergrowth of surrounding terrain. Clay dimly remembered seeing it online, all those months ago and falling in love with the place. The place had a distinctly tropical air to it that welcomed the two of them in as they made their way up the wooden steps and inside the restaurant. It wasn’t too busy, with only a handful of customers scattered around the worn tables, most of the noise coming from a large group of tourists, chattering noisily in the corner, their pale arms moving in wide gesticulations. Clay had slipped his sandals back on before they entered, yet he could still feel the chill of the tiled floor through the thin soles. Faded posters and photos littered the panelled walls and large fans hung from the ceiling, stirring the muggy air with each lazy rotation. Words like *rustic* and *authentic* slipped to the front of his mind, but George seemed to only care about the promise of food as he gravitated his way towards the counter in the centre of the building.

Clay’s eyes followed him. It was empty aside from an old man with leathered skin chatting with the woman behind the counter. Her arms moved with a practised motion as she worked, her mouth quirking up in a smile at whatever the man was saying. As they made their way over she greeted them in English, recognising their foreignness. As Clay returned her greeting and began studying the faded menu, George slipped away in search of a table. After a few hesitant questions, the woman behind the counter began explaining the food to him, talking through the foreign dishes in stilted English. Clay ordered everything that sounded good, his stomach giving an anticipatory pang as he handed over the money.

George had gone outside, onto the small fenced-off decking attached to the restaurant. It was quieter in the open air, so quiet Clay could hear the wooden planks creek under his feet as he made his way towards George. He was sitting under the thatched canopy, his elbows resting on the table as he looked out to sea, the gentle breeze playing with his dark hair. Clay sat opposite him.

“I hope you’re hungry, I ordered *so* much food?”

“Did you get the banana pancakes?” George asked.

“No,” Clay said apologetically. “It’s too late in the day to serve them.” George scowled and Clay had to bite back a laugh. “We’ll get them tomorrow.” He promised.

“We might have food in the house tomorrow.”

“You really think we’ll go shopping?”

“No...?” George’s voice was a hesitant agreement. “I don’t think I’ve been shopping since uni.”

“We’re going to have to be adults for once, I’m afraid.”

George gave a faux shudder. “How horrifying.”

A bird had fluttered down to chirp at them, a small creature with fluffy feathers of a light pearl grey. It watched them, with beady eyes, feet scratching against the wooden railing.

“I like this place.” George smiled. “It’s nice.”

Clay yawned. “You haven’t even eaten anything yet.”

“It’s got a nice feeling though.” George held out a slender hand to the bird as if to entice it off the railing, but it fluttered away, spooked. “Did you know it was here?”

“What, when we booked the house?”

George’s gentle expression settled into a frown, as though he had forgotten what had brought them here. He nodded.

“Yeh, we knew.” Clay cleared his throat. “I fell in love with the place, to be honest. It’s stuff like this that made me want to even come to this country in the first place.” Clay gestured around at their surroundings with a wave of his hand. “I mean, look at it.”

The decking they sat on was on the beach, raised up on wooden struts. It gave them the perfect view of the sea, as it stretched out, the gradient of blue growing in intensity as it raised up to kiss the skyline. The waves were gentle as they crept up the beach, lapping at the white sand in translucent ripples, before slinking back to join the billowing mass of water. The surface was clear, carrying nothing but dregs of copper seaweed, carried this way and that by each gentle swell. It was nothing like Florida, nothing like Clay had *ever* seen before, and the sight seemed to speak for itself as the pair fell silent, taking it all in.

They lingered in the quiet, mesmerised by the waves until their food arrived. Clay began to worry he’d ordered too much as the plates and bowls began to pile up. George didn’t seem to mind, only pausing to mumble a quick “Thank you” before beginning to eat, and Clay, after a slight hesitation, joined him.

There was mounds of fluffy white rice piled next to warm fried eggs, fresh tomatoes, shredded

chicken, spiced beans with green chillies and small ceramic bowls, filled with sauce so spicy it made George's eyes water. Every mouthful was laden with some extra garnish that fought to be noticed. Grated coconut, minced garlic, shallots, scallions and tangy lemongrass all battled against each other as Clay ate with eager hunger. There was fried fish with tight golden skin that split to reveal the soft white meat inside, tart limes, bright peppers, dense plain rice cakes and tender beef impaled on wooden skewers which smelt of woodsmoke and tasted of sweet chillies. It was all delicious.

The pair of them ate in silence, both ravenous after the hours on the plane and the long night, enjoying the dizzying variety of flavours, methodically devouring every scrap of food they could get their hands on. Clay ate until he wasn't hungry anymore, until his stomach ached and his headache had faded and his hands and mouth were stained with layers of sauce. Finished, at last, he leant back in his chair cradling a cup of black tea. It was sweet and hot, a little different than what he was used to but he still sipped at it languidly, enjoying the fragrant smell. George was still eating, but Clay was eager for conversation, so he spoke, his voice a little husky. "Did you sleep well last night?"

George swallowed his mouthful of food "I guess so. I don't usually like places that aren't home, but it was alright." He lifted his arm to rest his elbow on the table again, cupping his cheek in one hand, twirling his spoon with the other. "Did you sleep alright?"

Clay shrugged, pushing away the memory of aching sobs, of hot heavy tears that leaked unwillingly from his eyes and that empty feeling of brokenness. "I slept fine. Do still feel a bit tired though"

George hummed, his mouth full of food again.

"I don't know how long jetlag takes to wear off." Clay traced around the rim of his cup with a single broad finger. "I haven't been on holiday for ages."

"Me neither." George paused, studying his plate of food with reservation. "Was it nice seeing Scott again?"

Clay nodded. "I've missed him and Ana." His teeth worried at his lip, eyes fixed on the worn wood of the table, rather than his friend. "I'm sorry about how I acted with Hannah though. I really am."

"What about it?"

"I kinda lost it."

George set his spoon down a deliberate movement, his fingers still at last. "I noticed."

"It's just..." Clay laughed at himself, feeling oddly elated in the warmth of the afternoon. "All of my family said I'd be a mess, Sapnap said it was a stupid idea and I'd lose my shit." Clay shook his head in amazement. "And I lost my shit."

"Didn't you realise you were losing your shit when you hadn't slept in days and looked like a fucking wreck?" George said, matter of factly.

"Maybe..." Clay set his cup down. "I thought I was just worried about going away."

"You're such a liar." George's head was turned, peering at the rest of the restaurant.

"Hey, surely I'd know myself best?"

“Nope.”

Clay shook his head again, then rapped his hands firmly on the table, as if to accentuate his words. “It doesn’t matter now. I feel way better.”

George rolled his eyes. “The power of manifestation.”

Clay bit his lip. He had a funny feeling George was mocking him, but he didn’t want to pick a fight about it. He cleared his throat. “Regardless, I just wanted to apologise. I won’t be like that next time.”

George turned back to look at him, meeting his eyes with a warm sunny grin that made Clay’s stomach flip. “That’s good.”

They fell back to silence again, George continuing to eat while Clay only picked at what was left on his plate. With a flurry of wings, a different bird flew down to perch on the railing. This one had slick blue feathers and a bright orange belly and it hopped towards them on eyeing the remnants of food with an expectant cock of its head. Clay didn’t bother shooing it away. It seemed wrong to chase off something so pretty. He closed his eyes leaning back in his chair to listen to the rustle of the palm trees. George had ordered a cold tea, and the chunks of ice in it clinked whenever he raised it to his lips.

George spoke then, shattering Clay’s reverie, setting his glass back down on the table with a clunk. “If we’re talking about yesterday, can I ask you something?”

The breeze coming off the sea was cool but Clay could begin to feel beads of sweat pricking up on his palms, but he blinked his tired eyelids open and answered George with a hesitant. “Fire away.”

“When I asked you how you felt about Hannah, and you didn’t answer.” George’s voice was soft, coaxing. “Would you be comfortable telling me about it now?”

“Well...” Clay chased a single grain of rice around his plate, stalling for time. “I don’t *precisely* know how I feel about her. I don’t love her anymore if that’s what you’re asking.” Love was a strong word, and Clay knew he sounded angry, defensive.

“That’s good.” George nodded, still speaking in the same soft voice. “Do you like her?”

“No.”

“Clay...”

“I don’t!” Clay took in a deep breath, setting his spoon back down on the table. “I know I’ve been acting a little odd, it’s been difficult for me and you know that. It’s *weird* being around Hannah.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t know if you do, George. I know her *so* well, can tell when she’s being bitchy or insincere. Know when she’s nervous or putting shit on. *Every* interaction we have I’m reminded that I used to...” Clay stalled. “How I used to feel about her. Emphasis on *used to*.” His gaze snapped back to George.

George said nothing, studying Clay from under his lashes, disbelief lurking in his eyes.

“It’s not as if the only possible explanation is that I still like her. You shouldn’t know a stranger that well. Fucking forgive me if every *time* I speak to Hannah...” Clay trailed off, taking a deep breath, letting the anger fade from his voice. “I’m just scared she can read me just as well as I can read her.”

George chewed at his lip. “I get that.” His slender fingers were picking at a slice of melon, the ripe fruit glinting in the sunlight. He raised it to his lips, taking a bite as he looked out at the waves, crashing against the beach in a steady rhythm. Clay watched him, expectantly, waiting for something more, an apology, a level of understanding. It never came.

“Are you homesick?” The question fell from Clay’s lips to hang in the humid air, as though demanding some counter-payment for the honesty he’d offered up.

“I’m sure I will be.” George wiped his mouth with the side of his hand. Clay watched the motion. Transfixed. “How about you?”

“I feel a little guilty.” Clay sighed. “I didn’t communicate with my family in the way I wanted to, and now I’m gone I’ve realised that’s not something that’s just going to fix itself.” His cup gave a subtle clink as he set it back on the table. “I miss them. I miss them all.”
“I miss my mum quite a bit. I’m probably going to call her this afternoon.”

“Do you think she’s angry at you?” The small birds had left the thicket now, their bright wings catching the sun as they scudded along in the air.

“Why would she be angry?”

“This whole thing was very sudden.” Clay watched his friend intently. “She must have at least been surprised that you just left.”

George picked at his cuticles, his head tilted to the side. The stubble on his jaw was thicker now, dark hair creeping across his skin.

“George,” Clay murmured. “I thought we were having a talk.”

“About my *mum* ?” George gave a smile, his tone light, but Clay didn’t grin back.

“About *you* .”

George shrugged. “Well, she already knew about the trip from when I told her a month ago.” His dark eyes refused to meet Clay’s. “So I was just like... *I’m going now instead* .”

“And that was it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Is that what Sapnap said to you as well? *You’re going now instead* ”

“Clay.” George’s tone was a warning.

“What?”

“Just...” He sighed heavily. “Does it *matter* ?”

“It was unusual for you to do that kind of thing. I’m just *curious* .”

“He just sat on a call with me and guilted me until I agreed to go. That was it.”

Clay narrowed his gaze, opening his mouth to retort, but George cut him off.

“Why would I lie about this?” A sliver of sunlight had fought its way through the thatching, and it struck George’s face, turning his skin to satin and his eyes to pools of liquid gold. “I just want us to be happy here, I want us to enjoy it.”

“Can we *not* be happy here?”

“Well, that depends.”

George’s voice was soft and Clay matched the quiet mumble. “Depends on what?”

“If you can let yourself be happy?”

And as the silence stretched on, and, with something unmentionable skulking in his friends’ eyes, Clay couldn’t bring himself to answer.

They milled around for the rest of the day, a lazy afternoon spent settling into the house, both taking time to call their families. Clay had taken refuge in the spare room in order to talk to his parents properly. It had been a welcome call. They trod the line of concern and interest and Clay had managed to smile through the screen, shaping the truth into something more agreeable during their conversation. The only difficult part had been when they let Patches in. She had pawed at the camera when she heard his voice, her ears pricking up at the sound, giving small mews of distress. He missed them all. But there had been something so heartbreaking about her earnest joy and he longed, even now, to simply hold her in his arms again.

He hadn’t seen Leo or Hannah all day. He didn’t know where they were but he liked it this way, liked to think he could spend the rest of the trip avoiding them in a childish indulgence. Scott and Anaya had gone into the city to rent a car, leaving him with the promise that they would bring food back, and George was still in their shared room, talking to his mum, which left Clay to sit alone outside, watching the oncoming sunset stain the horizon with tangerine fire. He sat, on one of the outside chairs, letting his fingers run over the coarse polyester seat in absent-minded patterns. The garden was large, with a pool, decking, a fire-pit, all the necessities to check the boxes in a getaway home and Clay let his mind wander, with all the possibilities. It wasn’t much, but the flicker of excitement lit a glow in his heart, sparked an edge of hope, a gentle, persistent idea that it could be okay after all.

There came the low chatter of voices, the sound of steps on stone and Scott and Anaya rounded the corner, coming into the garden from the side entrance around the house. Clay greeted them with a wave as they made their way towards him. Scott was carrying two plastic bags, the cheap material turning translucent as it strained around cartons of food. Clay got to his feet as Scott gave him a cheery. “Hello.”

“Heya,” Clay grinned. “How was the city.”

“Busy,” Anaya sighed. “We managed to rent a car though, and that’s in the garage.”

“No more taxis, thank fuck.” Scott sounded relieved as he began to dig through the bags.

“Is it alright if I grab one of those to go give to George?” Clay asked, gesturing towards the styrofoam cartons. “He’s still in our room.”

“Of course, help yourself.”

“Thanks.” Clay said. The box was warm as he dug it out of the bag and as he turned to head back indoors he called to the pair. “I’ll be back.”

He made his way inside through the backdoor, and walked through the house, down the hallway to their bedroom, giving a quiet knock before opening the door. George was sitting on the floor, his back up against the wall and his laptop sitting on the hardwood floor in front of him. He looked at Clay as he entered and his warm brown eyes seemed a little wetter than usual.

“I bring food!” Clay declared, holding the styrofoam box aloft.

“Thank you.” George murmured, a small smile crossing his face.

“Is that Clay?” A voice crackled from the laptop. Female. British.

Clay ducked down next to George until his head was in frame to wave at the woman on the screen. “Hi, Miss Davidson.”

“Hello Clay!” She looked the same as she had last time Clay saw her. Thick dark hair curling around her pleasant face and a warm smile on her full lips. “You alright?”

“I’m doing good.” Clay said “I was just dropping in to give your son some dinner.”

“You’re spoiling him.” George’s mum laughed.

George scowled at the teasing, which only made Clay’s smile wider. “I’ll leave the two of you to talk.” He said.

“Was nice seeing you.” George’s mum waved goodbye, and Clay waved back. As he straightened up again, leaving the food on the floor, he brushed his hand lightly through Georges’s hair, shifting the soft strands with his fingertips. “I’ll be by the pool.”

Clay left by the french windows, rather than the bedroom door, and made his way down the small stone path to the pool, where Scott and Anaya sat by the pool, their feet dangling in the water, sending ripples across the surface. He joined them, toeing off his sandals and sitting at the edge on the cool stone tiles.

“He’s still talking to his mum.” Clay said, by way of a greeting.

“What time is it over there?” Asked Scott

“Like noon..?” Clay shrugged. “I don’t think it’s that early.”

Scott passed him the carton of food that had been sitting on the side and Clay took it with a grateful “Thanks”. The food was still hot, a simple mix of fried rice and fresh vegetables and the three of them ate in silence enjoying the gentle sounds of the evening and the quiet company. As the sun

dipped further down into the horizon, the wind began to pick up, carrying with it a hint of salt off the sea, the smoke of a far-away fire and the subtle threat of rain.

“Have either of you seen the weather forecast?” Clay asked.

“Yep,” Scott said. “There’s gonna be a storm tonight.”

“Do you think we need to pack anything inside?”

“I don’t think it’ll be that bad, not much wind, just rain.”

“We *are* right near the coast.” Anaya piped up.

Scott hummed in agreement. “It should be okay though.”

“Fingers crossed.” Anaya held her hand aloft, her two fingers crossed and Scott mirrored her action with a small smile. Clay couldn’t help the stab of jealousy that pierced him a hint of resentment that his friends had managed to stay together, all these years, and still love each other so earnestly.

“How’s the jetlag?” Scott asked suddenly, looking at Clay with a trace of concern.

“Not so bad, we’re both tired, but we’ll be alright.”

Scott hummed around his mouthful of food. “You two seemed *wiped* last night.”

“It’s been a rough week.” Clay sighed.

“About last night.” Anaya seemed tentative as she spoke, her brow furrowing as she looked at Clay. “I didn’t mean to imply that there was still anything between you and Hannah, like, any feelings. You just seemed quite overwhelmed and I know how hard it can be seeing someone like that. Even if they mean nothing to you.”

Clay felt something soft blossom in his chest, a warm gratitude that finally *someone* understood him. “Don’t worry, I know you didn’t mean anything by it.” He swallowed, his mind searching for a way to express his gratefulness. “Thank you, both of you.”

Scott reached out to squeeze his shoulder, and Clay, inexorably, felt a lump form in his throat.

“I’m really proud of you for coming out here. I know you didn’t do it *for* anyone, but that whole relationship messed you up. And for you to heal from that, to get over it...” Scott sighed, and Clay had to take in a frantic gulp of air, willing himself not to cry. “Like, I’m happy for you. And I’m happy you had George to help you. He seems like a great guy”

As Scott looked at him with wide understanding eyes, Clay felt his gratitude twist with guilt, suddenly aware of the web of lies he was tangled up in. He felt like a fraud, receiving praise for his maturity when the opposite was true. “Thank you. It means a lot.” He forced himself to keep his tone light as he replied. “And George *is* great. He’s helped a lot.” *Not strictly a lie.* Clay thought to himself as he began to play with the spoon in his hand. “And he’s been so sweet about the whole thing as well, he didn’t *have* to come, but he offered to and has been really...” He paused, searching for the right word “Accommodating.”

“I suppose ‘cause you’ve been friends for a while you’ve got a level of understanding.”

“I don’t even know how to put it into words. We’ve just spent so much time together and like...” Clay let out a heavy sigh. “It sounds so cliché, but we just compliment each other. He *gets* me. In a

way I didn't even realise I could be understood." Clay had meant to sound convincing. He hadn't meant to be *honest* . But the words that spilt out of him had been truthful, George *was* like that.

Scott and Anaya shared a small smile, and Clay felt his freckled cheeks flush. He didn't like how their small talk had devolved into indulgent praise of his fake-boyfriend.

"You two met online, right?" Scott asked, jolting Clay out of his musing

"Yeh," Clay smiled bashfully. "Still can't believe how lucky I've gotten, with everyone."

"You haven't met *one* murderer."

"Not *yet* ." Clay grinned. "And I'm sure I could push George a bit, get him to that level."

"Aw, c'mon, you're not *that* annoying."

Clay laughed. "Thank you, but British people have murderous tendencies so it doesn't take much."

"Is it the weather?"

"It's totally the weather. I've been there twice and it's *miserable* ."

"We've never been, but Ana wants to go to Italy."

"I just think it's pretty," Anaya smiled. "And the weather's better there."

"Agreed." Clay laughed.

"Next holiday we have, it better be in Europe then."

"What? You'd want to do another one of these?" Scott asked.

"Why not?" Anaya turned to look at him, her tone tinged with surprise. "We don't have to invite Hannah."

Clay barked a laugh, surprised at her bluntness. "I wouldn't mind that."

Their small talk continued, sharing long-overdue stories next to the pool, while the wind picked up whipping through the trees. Their conversation meandered through anecdotes, catching up on life, work, family, until drifting back to George again.

"How long have you two been dating?" Scott asked.

Clay had started splashing his feet lightly against the skin of the water, but his motion stilled as he concentrated, pulling the script out of his head. "Almost three months now. We don't really care about dates and stuff though."

"I thought it was longer." Scott mused.

"Yeh," Anaya hummed in agreement. "You two seem so comfortable with each other."

"I mean, we'd been friends for *years* ." Clay sighed. "I suppose there was always something there though. Something a little more." He gazed down at the rippling water, the lights underneath the

surface casting ghostly shadows across his legs. "Something shifted when I saw him in person for the first time. It was like I'd always felt that way about him, I just hadn't realised it until we spent time together, in person that *that's* what I wanted. It was difficult to talk about, difficult to find the courage to embrace it, but so worth it in the end." Clay took a deep breath, his thoughts lingering on the tricky way his words blurred fact and fiction. "I think I'm the happiest I've ever been. And yes, career success is part of that." Clay waved his hand in a vague dismissal, "I've had a lot of good things happen to me, but most of it's him. He just feels like *home*."

He stopped, a little breathless. Scott and Anaya were smiling at him again, their expressions soft and heartfelt. Clay felt heat flood to his cheeks under their scrutiny. He didn't like to lie to his friends. Except, it didn't truly feel like lying.

"I'm so happy for you." Anaya's eyes were warm, sincere.

"Yeh," Scott chipped in. "Especially after everything you went through, I'm so glad you found someone like that."

Clay smiled back. "Me too."

They talked until the last remnants of the sunset had been wiped from the sky, until the patio lights had flickered on and the night bugs had crept out, free at last from the dangers of the day. The wind was moving at a violent pace now tearing through their surroundings with anger and the threat of the oncoming storm had been enough to chase Scott and Anaya indoors. They said their goodbyes to Clay, making their way to bed, yet he still sat there, by the pool, shivering in the chill. He liked the quiet, liked the lonely alliance between him and the night, enjoyed the break from the endless stream of lies he'd been chaining himself to. Clay wanted to resent himself, wanted to hate that bitter man, stubborn to the core who'd made all those mistakes, all those nights ago. Who'd sent these events into motion, put him here, next to chlorinated water and a fairytale of maturity and happiness. Yet he couldn't find it in him to hate his past self, not when he knew he hadn't changed.

With a heavy sigh, he laid down on the cool stone tiles, ignoring the twinge of discomfort from his back. Despite the heavy clouds hanging in the sky, Clay could still catch glimpses of the stars, little pinpricks of white, an exotic brightness amidst the darkness. In another context, he might've called it beautiful. That was why he was here after all. He'd wanted to go somewhere beautiful with the woman he'd loved.

Thoughts like those had made the quiet dangerous so Clay stole back inside, retracing his steps to the wooden door of the bedroom and the company it brought him. A refuge from the mess in his mind. George was no longer talking to his mum. He lay, sprawled on their bed scrolling through his phone, yet he rose hastily to his feet when Clay entered, tossing the device back onto the sheets.

"Hey." He said.

"Hey." There was a barrier of prickly awkwardness between the two of them, and Clay pushed

against it, eager for comfort. "How's your mum?"

"She's good." George sighed. "She said she didn't miss me too much, but I think she does. She kept talking about how quiet the house was."

Clay frowned. "She'll be alright, though. Right?"

"Yeh, her sister's coming round at the weekend. She'll be fine."

Clay's eyes latched onto George's. "Things all good between the two of you?"

For a moment, he thought he saw a flash of anger in George's face, then it was gone. "We're fine." His voice was curt and his bottom lip stuck out as he seemed to mull over something in his mind. "We actually had a great chat about some things."

"Some things?" Curiosity bit at Clay. George's tone was an infuriating balance of deliberate and vague.

"She helped me sort some stuff out. Put some things into perspective."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

George paused, chewing at his lip in hesitation and Clay raised a questioning brow. The motion seemed to tip George into bravery and with a rush of breath, his words burst out. "I know you still like Hannah."

Silence. A heavy stilted silence in which Clay looked at George with wide eyes. "*What ?*" He stuttered, barking a laugh in pure bewilderment. "No I *don't* ." He was flooded with shock and disbelief, his mouth hanging open.

"It's pretty obvious you do." George's tone was tinged with derision, all caution abandoned as he stared Clay down, a demanding look in his eye.

"George, I don't, I've said I-"

"Please don't lie to me." There was an edge of hurt creeping into George's voice now and it made Clay even more desperate, desperate to make himself be believed.

"I'm not lying to you!"

"Clay, please, just tell me the truth."

"I *am* ." Clay looked at his friend, utterly baffled. "I don't have feelings for her, I *don't* ."

"Well, that's not what Sapnap told me."

Clay blinked, flooded with abject shock. "What?"

But George was already talking over him. "I get if you want to talk to him about some stuff, and not me, but I'm pretty fucking involved in this now so I'd appreciate some transparency."

"Okay, I don't know what conversation you had, but I *never* told Sapnap anything like that." Clay tried to keep his voice measured, confusion tingeing his tone.

"Clay! Please stop lying, I *know* -"

"*What* do you know? Because I never had that conversation with Sapnap. He asked about it, sure, but I never told him I still liked Hannah. I wouldn't because it's *not true* !"

“It would explain a lot of how you’ve been acting because this isn’t *normal* . You’ve had nine months to-”

“Nine months doesn’t mean a lot when I’ve been ignoring every thought I have of her.” Clay hadn’t meant to sound so defensive. “For fucks sake, I was *surprised* about this trip. That’s how much I’ve been blocking that shit out.”

“Why won’t you just *tell me* .”

“Tell you *what* exactly? It’s pretty evident that I’m going through something, that this isn’t easy. I’ve *told* you that. This doesn’t mean I’m fucking in love with Hannah!” Clay breathed deeply. “It can just *be difficult*. And if you cared about me you’d back off-”

“Of *course* I care.” George sounded angry now, an edge of resentment creeping into his voice. “I’m here aren’t I? I’m here for *you* . You’re the one being an asshole here, not me!”

“How am I being an asshole?” Clay asked, tersely. “All you need to do is *exist* . Just be my friend and fucking be there for me. And you’re still struggling?”

“Well act like you *want* me to be here. Act like you care about me then, like you *trust* me.”

“I *do* trust you.” Clay ran a hand roughly through his hair, tearing at the strands in frustration. “Just because I don’t want to tell you every *detail* of every *single* thing I’m thinking-”

“It’s not just that,” George pointed an accusatory finger at Clay. “Don’t make it seem like it’s just about that, so you can win this stupid fight.”

“Oh, so we’re fighting now?”

“Yeh, we are.” George stood his ground, leaning up into Clay. “Because I’m sick to shit of all of this, sick of being treated like I’m some second option you don’t even want around.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about.” Clay sighed, his tone half aggressive, half understanding.

“So what if it is?” George sneered. “It’s about a lot of things.”

“Like *what* ?”

“Like you being an asshole, not being honest-”

“You’re not being honest either!” Clay’s voice was clouded with indignancy as he stared down at George.

“You have asked *so much* of me!”

“What do you *mean* ? I didn’t ask *anything* of you, you *offered* to come.” Anger and hurt rose in Clay’s chest, urging him on. “I’m *not* being an asshole.”

“You *are* being an asshole.”

“*How?* ”

“You’re not telling me shit!”

“And has that upset you? Are you *upset* with me?” Clay’s tone was mocking but George seemed to take the question seriously as he stared Clay down.

“Yeh, I’m fucking upset. I feel like I’m second best and like you don’t trust me and that *hurts* .” His mouth was loose, his eyes wide and wet and coated with a veneer of desperation. “Now I’ve been honest are you gonna be fucking honest too?”

“Hardly honest if you still won’t tell me why you decided to fly *halfway around the fucking world*.”

“No need to say thank you or anything. Why does it *matter* why I offered? I’m here now, here for *you*, because you can’t stop letting your ex get the better of you.”

Clay swallowed, choosing to ignore the last comment. He lowered his tone, speaking evenly. “I just don’t *understand* why you did a whole turnaround. It’s not like you. You don’t just call people up all spontaneous and make shit happen.”

“What do you mean I don’t make shit happen?” George’s tone was incredulous as he glared at Clay. “I have a whole fucking YouTube channel, a whole career I’m building up on my own.”

“On your *own* ?” Clay let out a derisive chuckle, he was so tired of it all. Tired of George twisting his words around just so he had something else to complain about. “That’s a great joke.”

“What the *fuck* . You’re such a *dick*, you’re really gonna hold that over my head?”

Clay stared at him, mouth agape. “You’re the one that brought it up when that’s not what I meant at all.”

“I come all the way out here for *you* an-”

“I didn’t *ask* you to!” Clay’s voice was rising now as he stepped forward scarcely a foot apart from George. “I didn’t fucking ask you to. I’m *grateful* -”

“Oh, you’re *grateful* .” George snickered.

“Yeh, of course I’m *grateful* . Now if you regret it, and you wanna go home that’s *your* fault, don’t try and pin that shit on me. You’re the one that offered, you brought your ass out here.”

“And you brought your ass out here too! Maybe that’s why you’re being such a dick, ‘cause *you* regret it! You regret that even though you haven’t been with her for *months* , all it takes is one message and you’re in fucking *Bali* . And for what?” George’s chest was heaving as he stepped even closer to Clay. “I’m still confused as to why you even did this. Guess I’ll just add it to the list of things you *won’t tell me* .”

“Because I don’t know why I did it either!” Clay yelled. The two glared at each other, locked in a standoff. They were nose to nose, chests heaving. George’s eyes were bright, his lips red and he looked at Clay like he’d been holding onto these words for weeks. “I don’t *know* .” Clay’s voice crumbled, his words suddenly soft.

It had begun to rain. The promised storm had let loose at last, with the sound of the heavy drops, drumming down with fury, echoing through the tiled roof. Clay stood there, hands still clenched in fists, listening to the downpour.

“Why are you doing this?” He asked, his voice hollow. “What happened to being happy?”

“I’m just tired of you acting so *stupidly* .” George’s level tone was undermined by the pout of his

mouth, the lingering sulky expression. “We need to be on the same page.”

“We are .”

“We’re not.” There was a plea in George’s face, guilt and hurt painting themselves across his features. “It’s like you don’t respect me.” He mumbled.

“Well, I don’t when you’re attacking me like this, being *unreasonable* .” As soon as the words fell from Clay’s lips he knew they had been the wrong thing to say. George’s eyes went cold, his lip curling as he spat at Clay.

“What’s unreasonable is you pining after your ex-girlfriend, coming to a whole new continent just to see her.”

Clay groaned, not even bothering to argue against the accusation anymore. “Give me a fucking break. Can you just stop acting like a jealous, paranoid *boyfriend* ?” Clay gestured between the two of them. “We’re not dating, remember, this isn’t *real* !”

“That’s not quite the argument you think it is since we’re only pretending because you’re too much of a bitch to see your ex alone.”

“I’m not a bitch, this is Sapnap’s fault!”

“What? Sapnap called up Hannah and said the two of you were *dating* ?” George pounced on his words, letting out another mocking laugh. “Don’t fucking lie, he talks to me too you know.”

“I didn’t mean that and you know it” Clay hissed. “All this stupid, *let’s pretend to be boyfriends* shit, he went on and on about it, acted like Hannah would’ve fucked me over, he pushed me into this!”

“Yeh, because it’s not like you just got mad and pulled a petty move. What were you saying earlier? *This is your fault, George, don’t try and pin that shit on someone else* .” George was mimicking him with that cartoonish American drawl, but rather than being endearing, it set Clay’s teeth on edge. He glared at him, meeting those dark eyes, trying to match their intensity.

“You *know* Sapnap pushed me into it, went fucking on and on about it. We wouldn’t be in this situation if I was *always* going with you.” He snapped

George’s eyebrows lifted, his eyes widening. “‘Cause if it was me you just *couldn’t* have pretended to be *boyfriends* .”

“Don’t make that something it isn’t,” Clay hissed. “You *know* I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then how did you mean it?”

“What the *hell* is wrong with you? All I meant is I have a completely different relationship with you than I do with Sapnap.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” George was edging towards him now, closing the gap once more. Clay had never seen him like this, anger so visibly etched into his face. “Can’t we just both be your friends? Why do you always have to analyse and catalogue everything we say and do, everything we are to you.”

“This is so dumb.” Clay let out a bitter laugh. “Why do *you* have to be so fucking sensitive all the time? I can’t even discuss how I think of you without you taking everything I say as a personal attack.”

George gawked at him. “But I can’t say what I think of how you’re acting around Hannah without you *yelling at me* .”

“That’s different-”

“How is that different? If you’re being an idiot, can’t I just tell you.” They were so close together that George had to tilt his head up to look at Clay, his bare neck and narrowed eyes in striking contrast with each other. “I know what love looks like. You look at her like you want her.”

Clay felt anger twist inside of him, he knew George was upset, but he didn’t want to stop. Didn’t want to stop fighting when he knew he would win, and stopping felt a lot like admitting George was right. “Sorry, I’m not taking the word of a guy who’s been fucking single for three years.”

“Oh, so ‘cause I’m waiting for the right person rather than moving in with the first psycho bitch who sucks me off-”

“That’s too fucking far!” Clay yelled. “You don’t know *shit* about my relationship.”

For a moment he thought his friend would back down, would cower at his raised voice. But then, George’s eyes steeled, anger mingling with hurt as he spat at Clay. “Oh, there’s a line now? Oh, now there’s such a thing as *too far* .” George sneered. “And what do you mean I don’t *know* ? We’re *best friends*, Clay.” His voice dripped with derision. “I was there with you for every second of that relationship, remember.”

“Yeh, there is a *too far*. That was too far. Because you don’t know shit, you weren’t *there* . You don’t know her, you didn’t even meet her until yesterday.”

“I *do* know.” George sounded desperate as though pleading with Clay. “Stop treating me like I’m unimportant.”

“I’m not! You weren’t there, it’s the truth.” Clay balled his hands into fists, as the blood pounded in his ears. “God I can’t say *one* fucking *thing* around you, get a *grip* .”

“Me? I need to get a grip.” George laughed shrilly. “Bit rich coming from the guy who’s been *pinning* after his ex-girlfriend.” He threw his arm out in a wide gesture, his hand curling to form a point, jabbing at Clay’s chest. “She fucking cheated on you.” George drew in a deep, rattling breath. “I had to sit there on the phone and listen to you cry for weeks. *Weeks* .” His voice was rising even higher now, practically a shriek as he hurled words at Clay. “And yet you look at her once and you’re back to hanging off her every word, sta-”

“No, I’m not!”

“Yeh, that’s a great fucking joke.” George’s eyes were blazing in a wounded fury, so close Clay could’ve counted his lashes. “I’ve seen you. You stare at her and you’re speechless. It’s like she’s fucking perfect, like she’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen. Like she didn’t break your heart.” George’s expression hardened. “It’s pathetic.” He spat.

Clay felt anger coil inside of him, he knew George was upset, knew the best approach would be to stop now, to de-escalate the situation, but he was sick of it. Sick of having to pander to every single one of George’s hurt feelings. He took a step towards his friend, using his height to his advantage, squaring up over the shorter man. When he spoke his voice was icy. “Sorry I find it difficult to take advice from someone too *scared* to get into a relationship. Who’s so fucking self-conscious he’s worried his best friends are *judging him*. You don’t know what *the fuck happened*.” Clay narrowed

his eyes, spitting words at George with venom. “And I’m *so* sorry about that, that you don’t get to know every *intimate* detail of my life and that makes you *upset*. I’m sorry that you get offended by every damn thing I say, that you’re so oversensitive and frightened you can’t hold a fucking conversation without having a meltdown.” Clay leant in, so close their breath mingled and he could see the silhouette of his angry form emblazoned in George’s wide eyes. “And I’m just so damn sorry that I wish I had Nick on this trip instead of you.” His voice sunk even lower, a cruel murmur of a final blow. “Sorry I wish I had someone reasonable and sensible and mature instead of a screeching pathetic bitch.”

George stepped back, his eyes glazed and watery, his mouth gaping in a wordless motion. Clay felt a sudden immediate stab of guilt as he moved towards his friend, arm outstretched.

“George-”

“Fuck off.” His lashes were growing heavy with tears and his furious voice had fallen to a broken whisper.

“George, I-” Clay reached for him but George was already at the door.

“I’m going on a walk.”

“But-”

“Just fuck off,” George turned back around to stand in the doorway. He didn’t sound angry now. He sounded broken. “I don’t care anymore.”

Clay watched his friend go with a hollow ache in his chest. He didn’t even know what he’d been trying to say. *But it’s raining. But I didn’t mean it. But if you leave then you might not come back and I don’t want to cry myself to sleep again.*

With a lump building in his throat, Clay stumbled across the room, away from the door, away from everything he’d said. A hot tear welled in his eye, as he blinked furiously, slipping down his cheek in a testimony of regret. With a pounding head and trembling hands, Clay came to rest against the french doors, pressing his burning cheek against the chill of the glass. The night was dark, but as he tilted his eyes up, looking into the sky, he could see the mass of heavy raindrops, falling without an end.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently, people read the author's notes now??? Absolutely terrifying concept. Yet, all I have to say in this one is I very much hope y’all enjoyed, thank you for every comment and kudos, it rllly means a lot. Catch you in the next one & I hope everyone has a great day <3
p.s Go follow me on twitter- [@LolaLikes](#) , god has given me the ability to hyperlink and who would I be if I didn't abuse it

After The Storm

Chapter Notes

rocks up two months late with 9k words and way too many semi-colons Hey there darlings, how y'all doingggg

Fr tho, sorry about the wait and now buckle in for a long pre-chpt note

Firstly, THERE IS SMUT IN THIS CHAPTER. It falls at the very end and it's pretty obvious when shit's ramping up, I'd advise u check the tags and decide if u wanna read based off that. Since this is plot based porn I will be putting a sfw summary at the end notes, just so this fic is accessible to as many people as possible- basically u can skip it if u get uncomfy and not miss anything plot-wise.

Secondly, I NOW HAVE A BETA!!! Woooo- all this rlly means is that TWO people are culpable for the mistakes, rather than one- can't promise any uptake in quality, the economy's in shambles. All the same, I appreciate my sweetheart very much, having a beta has made me feel a little less apprehensive abt pressing that "publish" button, so go show him some love- [manass777](#) (ik it's quite an unfortunate username, but he insists it's funny and the content's good anywaysssss)

That was a lot to hit y'all with- go read now, go go enjoyyyy <333

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Last night's rain had left Bali a sodden mess. Even though the downpour had stopped in the early hours of the morning, drops were still trickling down through the trees, tracing over glossy leaves to collect in the puddles littering the ground. Despite the vivid reminders of the storm, the sun still cast bright splashes of light and the heat was creeping back into the air, more forceful than before as though in direct opposition to the rain that had chased it away.

Clay trod with cautious steps, around the damp pools on the ground, the cheap carrier bag in his hand jostling against his legs with every long stride. He'd been worried, so unrelentingly worried that George wouldn't come back, or, if he did, it would be with a demand to catch the quickest plane home to England. But when Clay had woken, bared his aching eyes to the damp morning, George had been there. Curled up beside him in that sprawling bed with hair dried curled from the rain and the same clothes he had worn yesterday. So that was something. Clay was sure George wouldn't have fallen asleep next to someone he *hated*, despite the angry words that they'd hurled at each other.

So Clay had risen, careful not to wake George, and crept from their room. He had walked, alone, down to the beach whilst the sunrise kissed the sky awake, making the pearl grey clouds blush in shades of apricot. And now he was walking back, back to George, small and content in the peace of sleep. George, who had looked so vulnerable in that morning light, with his slender fingers grasping at the edge of the duvet, face half-buried in the soft sheets. Relief had flooded Clay then, and it still lingered in him now as he clutched the bag a little tighter, listening to the sound of

roosters as they crowed at the sun in a shrill approval of the morning.

He hadn't chased after George last night, hadn't followed him out into the torrential rain to beg for forgiveness. He'd stayed in that empty room, hearing the thunder roll down, echoing off some distant mountain and wallowing in his guilt. It was how their fights had always gone, frustration bubbling up and over into something hurtful, and then the retreat. Usually, it came in a day of inactivity, unanswered messages and “ *user offline* ” . So Clay had given George his space, let him run away and then fallen asleep alone, lost without the usual reassuring breaths by his side, tears falling in a gentle echo of the angry weather.

By the time he made his way back to the house, daybreak had solidified its hold on the skyline, bringing with it a tremulous kind of optimism. Clay entered the now-familiar pale building, toeing off his sandy shoes on the porch before making his way into the kitchen. His hands were made clumsy with nerves, as he emptied the bag he'd carried so carefully, peeling flimsy plastic away from his treasures. There was a honey-dew melon, the same kind George had eaten so eagerly yesterday, bought off a fruit cart with a promise of ripeness, as well as two tin containers. These were warm to the touch, and when Clay prised the crimped lid open, the smell of caramelised sugar flooded the kitchen. It was banana pancakes, of course. Charred from the pan and studded with chunks of ripe fruit, a golden brown peace-offering served with maple syrup. *It's an odd apology* , Clay supposed, *breakfast* . *But what else can you do?*

Clay was disturbed from his musing by the subtle noise of a door opening, from down the hall. His head whirled around, his mind still lingering on his friend, half-convinced it was George coming to find him. Except, the footsteps he heard sounded too rapid, too loud, and when the figure finally cleared the corner, it was Leo. He looked the same as he had in that Facebook post, all those weeks ago, dark eyes, sepia skin, an effortlessly handsome face that made Clay want to hide in one of the kitchen cupboards until he left the room again. Despite his nerves over George, Clay half-wished it *had* been him, walking down that hallway, anything was better than the awkwardness of skirting round the *new boyfriend* .

“Hey,” Leo's bleary voice made it clear he'd just woken up. “I didn't realise anyone was in here, I can go if you want.”

“No, it's fine.” Clay's hands wouldn't stop fiddling with the edge of the bag. “I don't mind sharing the kitchen.”

“Thanks,” Leo walked into the kitchen with long steps, extending an arm out to Clay with a warm smile. “I'm Leo, by the way.”

“Clay,” Clay let his pale eyes meet Leo's warm brown ones, returning the smile. “It's nice to meet you too.” He said and was almost proud of the way his voice didn't catch in his throat, as they completed their charade, both fully aware of who the other was as they performed their introductory handshake.

“Have you guys been settling in well?” Leo had turned to the sink, quick hands moving to fill a coffee press.

Clay nodded, occupying himself with an attempt to find plates in one of the many cupboards. “It’s been good. We both love it out here.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yeh, It’s great how close to the beach this place is, we love the sea.” Clay could feel himself withering under the deliberately polite small talk.

“Clay,” Leo was looking at him with deliberation, his hands twisting around the lid of a coffee jar. “I would really like it if things weren’t, like, weird between us.” A cough, a nervous twitch of fingers and Clay realised, suddenly, that Leo was just as nervous as he was.

“Of course. Hannah and I’ve both moved on, trust me, there’s no bad blood there.” Clay inwardly cringed at his phrasing, letting his eyes fall back to the fruit in front of him.

“That’s good then, I just wanna be chill as much as the next person.”

“Likewise,” Clay barked an awkward laugh. “I’m glad you feel the same.”

The cafetière at the stove had begun to bubble, filling the kitchen with the invasive smell of fresh coffee. Clay wrinkled his nose as Leo leant against the worktop.

“What’s this then, breakfast, in bed?” Leo chuckled with a gentle shake of his head “You’re raising the bar, man.”

“What can I say, my boyfriend’s lazy,” Clay’s fingers chased over the rough skin of the melon as he cut it down into messy slices.

“It’s sweet of you.”

Clay didn’t know if it was his imagination but the air felt heavy with a stiff awkwardness, the constant reminder that *Leo was dating Hannah*. However much they wanted to ignore it there would always be that prickle of competition.

“Thanks,” Another awkward smile as the knife in his hands fell in a rhythmic beat. “I try.”

They moved around the kitchen in silence, Leo preparing the coffee with the steady ease of someone who had done the job many times over. Clay left half of the fruit wrapped in clingfilm in the fridge and managed to find a wooden tray, lurking in one of the cupboards. As he loaded it up with the plates of pancakes and fruit, he felt suddenly aware of how *domestic* his little gesture was. He hovered in the doorway, tray in hands. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You too,” Leo had used the cuff of his sweater to wipe a spill from the worktop, and now the fabric was stained a dirt brown. For some reason, it made Clay like him a little more. Another little imperfection. “I hope your boyfriend likes the breakfast.”

“I do too.” Another nervous smile snuck its way onto Clay’s face. “Talk to you later.”

“You too.”

Clay made his way down the hallway balancing the tray in one hand as he opened the door to their bedroom. George was in the same position he had been when Clay woke up, curled up on his side, face hidden in the pillow. The curtains were still closed so the warm light had a hazy glow to it, the bright sun tamed by the fabric. Clay set the tray down on the bedroom table, his limbs suddenly heavy, so heavy it was impossible to move. His chest felt tight. It was still feasible that George *did* want to go home, did hate him, even if he shared the bed with him, that didn't mean anything. Right there, right over there on that patch of floor Clay had screamed at him that he didn't want him here, didn't need him, didn't trust him, didn't care about him enough to mind his temper and shut up for once-

Clay must have made some sort of noise, or maybe it was just his presence, looming over the side of the bed. Either way, George was stirring, and the window of opportunity that would let Clay run away was rapidly shrinking. So, it didn't take that much bravery to simply reach out a shaking hand and touch his shoulder in a gentle push. George shifted, giving a soft mumble of protest at being awoken.

“George.” Clay kept his voice soft, soothing, the same tone he used on Patches when he was trying to rouse her from an inconvenient nap.

Another mumble, another gentle pull of the blankets and George rolled over, blinking open warm eyes in fogged disorientation.

“G'morning.”

“Hey,” Clay's mind was blank as George pulled the covers a little tighter around him, his soft morning voice a stark contrast to the angry shouts echoing in Clay's mind. “I brought you breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” When George spoke a little louder his voice caught in his throat, gravelly and hoarse.

“Yeh, if you want it, of course.” It was so unfair. The way George looked at him, with shy eyes as though surprised Clay would take the trouble to bring him *breakfast*. Breakfast was the least he could do after-

And then George's soft mouth curled up in a smile and Clay quite forgot what he was thinking about.

“I got the banana pancakes, the ones you wanted yesterday.”

“Is this an apology?”

“If you want it to be. You can eat them even if you're still upset with me.” Clay's tongue tripped over his words, and George was *still* looking at him with that disarming softness.

“They smell good.”

“You want them then?”

“Of course,” George pulled at the comforter beside him in a clear invitation, shuffling along the bed. “Come on.”

Clay felt so unbearably awkward, tall and gangly as he folded into the bed, the right side, George’s side. His mind struggled to catch up, still in the kitchen with Leo, still at the beach with the wooden fruit cart, still crying under the covers in the middle of the night, lingering in guilt, in anger, in worry, over and over, an indulgent mountain of emotion, all piling in his chest, entirely too much to feel all at once.

The wood grain of the tray felt rough as Clay passed it over to George. The little sound of glee his friend made seemed to worm its way into his brain, a small affirmation that hung in the bright glow of the bedroom.

“Thank you.”

It was oddly formal. Clipped and deliberate in that proper British tone. Clay smiled anyway.

“No problem.”

Clay felt the warm touch of George’s fingers when he passed him a plate, but when Clay looked his way, all he could see was dark hair and the sharp line of George’s profile, as he gazed down at the covers. George took a bite of the breakfast, so Clay did too, and suddenly, it didn’t seem like that bad of an apology anymore.

The pancakes were delicious, soft and sweet with specks of burnt sugar and whole slices of ripe banana, cooked into the batter, ready to melt on the heat of hungry tongues. They smelt of mellow banana, the scent coaxed to intensity by the heat of the fruit, yet there was a hint of caramel too, sweet and morish as Clay bit down, each bite more greedy than the last. His stomach felt suddenly empty, clamouring for more, and as Clay reached for a slice of melon, his arm brushed against George’s.

“D’you like the breakfast?”

“Mhmm,” George spoke, muffled around his mouthful of pancakes. “I’m still mad at you though.”

A chill like the cold kiss of glass had snaked its way into Clay’s chest. He nodded frantically, the motion a rapid jerk. “I-I understand that. I said some really nas-”

“Not that mad though.”

“You’re allowed to be.”

“I know I’m *allowed* to be”

“I just-” Clay took in a deep breath. “I get it, I’m not gonna pressure you to forgive me or anything. You can have your space.”

“Thank you.” They sat with deliberate distance between the two of them, the anger of last night

still a raw memory.

“I do really like the pancakes.”

“I’m glad.”

“And the fruit, and everything, it was really nice of you to make the effort.”

It was bewildering, the jump from soft and warm, to glacial anger and back again.

“I’m happy you like it.”

Back to silence. The white walls of the room looked almost yellow in the hazy morning.

“Do you want to talk about it?” The words slipped out before Clay could remind himself of common sense.

“What?” George let loose the useless question as though speaking the words of a practised script.

“Last night.”

George giggled, light and sweet and the rind in Clay’s hand began to leave imprints on his skin under the force of his grip.

“*Last night?* That sounds kinda...”

Clay had to laugh. He had to. “You know what I *mean* .” He dragged out the last word as the sun crept in, a little brighter. “Seriously, we should talk about it.”

There was syrup on George’s knuckle and it stained his skin a honeyed brown. The shade matched his eyes.

“I’ll feel bad if we don’t.” Clay’s voice sounded a little too much like a plea, so he took a hasty bite of fruit, filling his mouth with a burst of sweet flavour.

“I started the fight. It’s not all on you.” George sounded guarded, wary.

“But it *is* . I didn’t mean what I said.”

“Neither did I.” George dragged slender fingers through his tousle of hair, frowning at the mess of knots. “We were both mad.”

“I really upset you, George, I know I did. Let me say sorry for that.”

George gestured down at his empty plate. “I thought this was sorry.”

“Please.”

George’s eyes were sharp, their glassy chill matching the bite in Clay’s chest. “What about the Sapnap thing.”

“The Sapnap thing?” It was Clay’s turn for useless questions; the string of words buying him time.

“That night, that night he called me up, told me about his nan, about the trip,” George spoke with vindication, his gaze fixing Clay in place. “He *told me* you liked Hannah. *Told me*. Why would he lie?”

“To get you to go, to fly out to Bali.”

“I would’ve gone anyway.”

“Would you?” And now Clay was the one staring George down, his brow furrowed in an accusation. “Both of you seem to think I’m some helpless idiot when it comes to Hannah. You’ve gotta be there, watching me, managing me-”

“And you’re not?” George swallowed; his throat bobbing as though the movement took effort.

“Not some helpless idiot?”

“*No* . I don’t love her. She can’t do shit to me.”

“Sapnap said-”

“*Listen*,” George blinked in surprise and Clay rushed on, his words tripping out in a stammer.

“Listen, I *promise* you, I never told Sap I liked Hannah. I swear it. On my family, on *Patches*. I’ll swear it on whatever you want me to swear it on.” Clay reached out, turning George’s hand over to twine their fingers together, the pad of his thumb brushing over that little streak of syrup. “I *promise* you. And if you find out I’m lying you can fly back home, you can never speak to me again if you don’t want to.”

George’s eyes were still guarded but they’d lost that cold tinge, and when Clay squeezed his hand, he squeezed back.

“I *swear* . I never told Sapnap *anything* .”

And at last, George nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I believe you.” George shrugged, his voice bubbling into a laugh. “I don’t even know why.”

“Thank you.” Clay’s voice was husky, tinged with gratitude. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“And Clay,” George’s hand felt like it was trembling in his. “I’m *really* sorry, all that stuff I said about you and Hannah, I wasn’t *there* , I don’t really know, and-”

“George,” George’s mouth hung loose, as though gasping for air after all those heavy words. “I don’t care.”

“You *should* .”

“I don’t.” Common sense was far gone now, it had left Clay to wander somewhere far away from this yellow room and when he spoke it was as though he was trying to prise open his skull and show the contents to George, open and vulnerable and ready to be hurt, but at the same time, so eager to be understood. “I care about *you* . It hurt to fight, it hurt to be worried that you hated me, that I was losing you, but what you said? It was just words. You’ve said so many words, *good*

words, I remember *them* , *they* matter. Not that. It was just a fight, just one fight and now it doesn't hurt anymore. So it doesn't matter."

"Clay..."

"You don't have to say anything. I just want this. I just wanna be..."

"Normal?"

"Yeh."

"I think we're past the point of that." George gestured between the two of them with his free hand. " *This* isn't normal. Normal isn't pretending to date your friend."

" *Best* friend," Clay interjected. The distinction felt important, somehow. "You're my best friend George. And it's normal for us, we can make it normal. I don't want to lose you over something like this."

" *This* being Hannah." George asked.

" *This* being anything." His skull was still wide open, the truth somehow terrifying after how long it had been hiding away. "I don't ever want to lose you at all."

Their eyes met, dark warm brown affixed by blue-green and in that silken moment, time seemed to fall to its knees. The very fabric of linear motion had all at once become exhausted, and rather than slipping fluidly along, it had sunk to a slow crawl: each moment hanging around them, heavy and long, stretching languidly out in the warm space of the morning. Clay might have called it awkward, however, something was hanging in the air, an edge of charged deliverance that lent importance, locking his eyes in place, for each agonising second. He felt like a blinkered animal, oblivious to all except what was directly in front of him. George and his pretty eyes and the ripples of emotion that would flit their way across his face whenever each feeling got the better of him. It felt important, important to stay here, in each elongated stagnant moment, with George's hand so heavy and warm in his. Clay held it as though it was something precious, his fingers twitching in idle circles over knuckles and veins, drawing shallow shallow breaths until he couldn't bear it anymore.

He cleared his throat, ducking his head looking away from George and as quickly as the feeling had settled it dissipated again, leaving the clocks to tick along at their regular pace once more.

"I'm going to kill Sapnap," He said, forcing a laugh at the end of his words.

"Fair enough." George smiled, his voice a little quiet, and Clay felt a touch of warmth in the knowledge that he hadn't been alone in that moment.

"I'm not actually. I'm gonna call him. Probably yell at him a bit."

"I'll join you."

"Are you a hundred per cent sure he said he said I liked Hannah? Like those words exactly?" Clay already knew the answer, but it felt nice to play the part, to tread the lines of normalcy in their interactions and enjoy the small smiles it provoked.

“Well, not *those words*, but that meaning, yes.”

“Are you *sure* ?”

“ *Yes* .” There was one of those smiles now. Clay traced it with quick eyes, savouring it.

“Positive?”

“Clay,” George’s mouth dropped the smile in favour of a pout. “I’m positive.”

“Cool, maybe I’ll kill him then.”

A laugh was even better than a smile; it made Clay’s chest glow.

They lingered in the quiet, listening to the songs of the morning birds. When Clay strained his ears he thought he could hear Leo, still moving about in the kitchen, but it could’ve just been the house shifting, the foundations uneasy after the downpour. George spoke, a little nervously, tightening his grip on Clay’s fingers as his words stumbled out.

“I’m probably gonna go for a walk, just to...” George looked back up at Clay, then ducked his head down again. “I don’t know, think things over?”

“That’s cool.”

“I’m not upset or anything, I just want to be alone for a bit.”

Clay nodded, “I get that.” Despite his best attempts to mask it, his voice came out rough and George squeezed their hands together again, his palm a little clammy.

“I promise I don’t hate you.”

“I know.”

When George smiled, his cheek creased and a shadow pooled in his dimple. It was almost hard to see, the stubble on his face had grown even thicker since yesterday, and it sat, dark on his skin, at odds with his wide eyes and soft rosy mouth. When George slipped his hand out of Clay’s it left him feeling empty, not just in the way the air of the room curled across the pads of his fingers, but in the way Clay wanted to chase after George, bring his hand through the empty space and reconnect with him. It felt childish, but something was aching in his chest that urged him to do it all the same.

By the time he’d brought his mind back to reasonable things, like thinking, the hand he so badly wanted to touch was all the way across the room, curling around the edge of the curtain. Clay watched George pull the light fabric back, his slender frame set against the light as it spilt in, free from the hazy confines. George turned, looking at him, a little expectantly and Clay couldn’t help the awkward cough that slipped from his throat.

“I’ll, uh, go wash up.” His hands scrambled for the tray on the bed, stacking the empty plates with a little more ferocity than necessary.

“Cool.” George lingered by the french doors, his hands reaching up to rub his eyes as he spoke, almost shyly. “I really appreciated breakfast. It was great and it uh...”

All Clay could see was George’s profile, bathed in sun, his creamy skin coloured with a light flush that mirrored the pink clouds outside. “No one’s ever done something like that for me before.”

Clay shrugged loosely. “It was just breakfast. I can bring you breakfast every day this month if you want.”

The look George gave him made his mouth go dry.

“Please don’t do that.” There was not a trace of sincerity in George’s quiet appeal.

“Can’t stop me.”

“Yes, I can. I’ll wake up before you and bring you breakfast first.”

“You’re such an idiot, nice-ness isn’t meant to be *competitive* .”

George turned to face him and Clay could see the dimple in his cheek once more. “Guess I won’t bring you breakfast then.”

“Hey, I never said don’t give me food.”

George was laughing, but his hand was already pushing open the door and that little ache in Clay’s chest was growing larger as it cried out, begging George to stay.

“I’ll see you later, Clay.”

George said his name with such softness, Clay didn’t care how abruptly the conversation ended. He simply murmured his own goodbye and watched George through the glass as he put his shoes on, then walked away down the path.

The kitchen was thankfully empty; Leo had left nothing behind but the smell of coffee so Clay breathed shallowly until he had opened the window. He’d never liked the smell of coffee, it was too harsh, something bitter and biting. Clay felt strangely itchy as he filled the metal sink with water, listening to the tinny sound each drop made as it struck against the hard surface. It was as though something was moving under his top layer of skin, something restless that didn’t belong to him, making itself known.

The syrupy plates were difficult to clean in the lukewarm water, and the brown stains smudged themselves across the ceramic. It reminded Clay, quite suddenly, of George’s hand, and that little streak across his knuckle. As he stacked the plates on the plastic draining board, his mind wandered back to the bedroom, lingering over those moments, tenuous and soft, bathed in yellow light.

The hand holding was new, it was nice, in a strangely intimate way, a compromise against the need he felt to be held. He couldn’t deny the connotations attached to it, but it was hand-holding, that’s

all, a little show of comfort and solidarity, it didn't mean it was going to spiral into anything else. And Clay liked the contact, he liked intimacy and if this was how he could enjoy that whilst adhering to George's boundaries then that was how they would live. It was a bonus if George's hand felt so perfect in his, small and slender with fine bones stark against his smooth skin. And Clay's hands were big, big enough that the difference between them was noticeable and if that difference sparked something territorial in him, a strange unspoken something that liked to rear its head whenever he saw his broad fingers trapping George's; well that was a secret shared between him and this quiet kitchen. Something to think about while he swirled the soapy water, and never examine more.

After Clay had dried his hands and let the water swirl away down the sink, he leant against the counter to tap at his phone, still warm from his pocket. He hadn't spoken to Nick since a brief conversation yesterday, but when he opened up discord, he saw his friend was active. He didn't pick up the first call, and by the time the second and third went through, unanswered, Clay started to feel irritated. The sofa in the living room gave a gentle creak as he flopped down onto it, eyes still fixed to his phone screen as he tapped out a message.

dream: Sap, we need to talk

dream: Nick

dream: You dick, ik you're active

Clay's thumbs drew circles in the air above the screen of his phone, yet the display still stubbornly refused to change. *Asshole* .

dream: Ik what you said to George, come on

It was mainly confusion fueling his urgency, the need to know, the need to understand. Yet Clay would be lying if he didn't acknowledge the sense of betrayal that stirred in his chest, the anger at all the damage Nick had done. That they'd all done.

Nick didn't pick up when Clay called his number either, so after sending another handful of annoyed messages, Clay slipped his phone back into his pocket. He couldn't quash the idea that he was somehow being treated like a child, managed by his friends due to some presumed inadequacy. He also couldn't abandon the underlying want to just be at *home* again. In his familiar room, under the ceiling he'd looked at a thousand times, hearing the hum of his pc, seeing Patches napping on his bed.

Before the swell of homesickness became overwhelming, Clay was jolted out of his self-pity by the familiar sound of footsteps, sounding down the hall. It was Hannah. She started a little,

presumably surprised to see him slumped on the sofa.

“Good morning.” She was holding a stack of plates with a mug perched precariously on top and a second mug in her other hand. They were the same one’s Leo had gotten out of the cupboard earlier.

“Hey,” Clay’s voice came out a little rough as he looked away from Hannah. He gazed down, unseeing as his fingers tapped an unsteady rhythm on his leg. “Did you sleep well?”

He heard her step across the room, into the kitchen, and the smile on her voice as she answered. “Yeh, thank you. I think we’re almost caught up on sleep, which is nice.”

Clay hummed in agreement. The sound rumbled in his chest.

“Did George like the breakfast?” Hannah’s voice carried across the empty space and Clay twisted around on the sofa to look at her, surprised.

“He did. I guess Leo told you we met then.”

Hannah nodded, her hands still busy at the sink.

“He seems nice.” It wasn’t even a lie. Despite all the reasons not to, Clay liked Leo.

“I’m happy you two are getting along, I’m happy everything’s sorting itself out, to be honest.” Hannah had left the kitchen now, walking into the living room, drying her hands on her baggy hoodie as she stepped. Clay didn’t like how close she was getting, didn’t want to meet her eyes.

“Yeh, it was a lot. Thanks for reaching out though.” It was a sentiment he’d expressed before, in stilted messages, but he didn’t have anything else to say.

“Of course, I mean, you already paid for your part of the trip.” Hannah had settled onto the sofa adjacent to his, her legs curled up under her slender frame. “Listen, Clay, I’m really glad you came along.” Clay preferred the way George said his name, it sounded sour coming out of Hannah’s mouth. “I was worried you wouldn’t, I know you’re busy but we also had quite a messy break-up and...” She sighed, heavy and long. “I’m glad we could sort this out.”

Clay shrugged. “I mean, it was my idea in the first place, to come out here, like, I’m pleased it worked out and I got to bring George, but I would’ve come anyway.”

“You would’ve?”

“Yes,” Clay’s jaw tensed. “I *love* this place.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

He hated it. Hated the layers of meaning behind those simple words. She remembered. She remembered all those long nights, curled up in front of a scuffed laptop, trawling through site after site, travel guides, airport sites, currency conversions, lists of attractions, where to eat, where to go. She remembered the excitement, both of them working long hours yet staying up late all the same just to curl up in each other’s arms and romanticise about how the cities would sound, how the tang of the sea would smell, how different and vibrant and beautiful it would be, a world away

from Florida. Clay wished he could take it all back, then maybe he wouldn't feel like she was digging into his chest right now, picking him apart with clawed hands. *Fuck off. Stop knowing me. It isn't fair.*

"Does George like it here?"

Clay started, a little surprised at Hannah's words. She spoke sweetly and gently, but something was lurking in her undertone. A subtly that Clay prodded at, attempting to weaponise their familiarity in return for understanding. He cleared his throat. "I think he likes it. I mean, it's a beautiful place, who wouldn't."

"And it's probably been nice spending time with each other in person as well."

"I'm sure it's been nice for you and Leo too, getting away from your lives and all that."

"I only meant, y'know..." Hannah bit at her lip, teeth worrying over a mouth Clay knew all too well. "You guys have been dating online, at least, I presume so."

"We have."

"How long has that been a thing?"

"Around three months."

"You two happy?"

"Yes." Clay kept his tone curt, still scrutinising Hannah. The pair of them fell into silence, Clay dragging his socked feet across the crevices in the floor.

The itch had come back, restless and infuriating and Clay fought the urge to drag his nails across his skin. Hannah was infuriating, both in an obvious sense and in some secretive, unidentifiable way. The fact Clay couldn't put a name to the latter feeling was, in turn, an annoyance itself and his feet began to move at an agitated pace as he fidgeted.

"I don't want to pry," Clay stilled, a little nervous. "But," Hannah's tone was deliberate. "Did you guys fight last night, you and George?"

"What?" Clay's mind was still lost in puzzling over the feeling Hannah provoked, but her words pulled him up into shock.

"Leo said he heard yelling, couldn't make out anything but you seemed pretty mad."

"It wasn't anything serious" Clay shrugged, but his balled fists betrayed him. "It's just been a pretty stressful time, sorting out the trip."

"Well, I'm glad you two are alright."

"Are you?" The bite of anger had worked its way into his voice now, but Clay knew Hannah would've sensed his frustration long before that.

"Yes, Clay. I don't want you guys to *break up*."

“No, you just don’t want me to be happy.”

“Of course I want you to be happy, we’ve both moved on and I’m *glad* .” Hannah’s eyes were wide, imploring.

“You’ve got a problem with George.” Clay said it as though it was a fact. He was rewarded with a twitch in Hannah’s mouth, satisfaction rearing its head as her eyes narrowed.

“Well, how long did you like him?” There was something accusatory lurking in her tone and Clay knew his jaw had clenched at the words.

“Not long. Is that what your problem is?”

“Oh, come on Clay.” She was so smugly patronising it made Clay feel like an angry teenager, full of bubbling rage and the intense desire to leave fist-shaped holes in drywall.

“ *What?* ”

“Don’t be dumb, you’ve known this guy for *years* . And you just, never looked at him differently *until* we broke up?”

“Until I met up with him for the first time actually, which was *months* after we broke up. Don’t make this into something it isn’t.”

“Don’t make me seem irrational for sounding suspicious, it *is* suspicious.”

“No, it isn’t.” Clay’s lip curled. “You’re the cheater, not me.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Hannah sounded a little breathless, hurt and frustration clear on her face and Clay’s sense of satisfaction grew. “Is that it then?” He snapped. “Are you gonna be alright now.”

“I’ve been *fine* , *you* picked a fight.” Hannah shifted on the sofa, her voice an acidic snap. “If you’re mad at your boyfriend go take it out on *him* , not *me* .”

“I told you, it wasn’t anything *serious* .” His palm hurt from all the times his nails had sunk into the soft flesh. “As you said, George and I have been friends for a *long time* . We know how to communicate.”

“God, you’re so fucking childish.”

“What can I say, you bring out the worst in me.”

“C’mon Clay, that isn’t fair.”

“Fair?”

“I fucked up once and now you’re going to hate me forever?”

Something hardened in Clay’s chest, resolve settling as he got his way up off the sofa. “I’m not doing this.”

“Clay...” Hannah reached out a hand, her tone beseeching, but Clay whirled around, snatching his arm away from her grasp.

“No! I’m not fucking doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“We *did* the whole bitter ex thing, we did it for *months* . You can’t thank me for being mature then argue like this.”

“I’m *not* , you brought up-”

Clay cut her off with a short laugh. It was almost impressive how affronted she sounded. “Sorry I retaliated, I’ll ignore you next time.”

“Yeh, you’re good at that.”

Hannah’s eyes were cold, not cold like George’s had been, his chill a mask for hurt, but cold in a bitter way. If George had been glass, Hannah was frosted metal. Sharp and wicked, an angry cold that clung to warmth and punished any heat it found.

“I only ignored you because you wouldn’t leave me alone.” Clay thought back to after the break-up. Hannah had been distraught, begging for second chances whenever she could. It had been suffocating. He’d set the boundaries, followed through with one of the most difficult decisions he’d ever had to make and it hadn’t given him anything. No closure, no peace, just Hannah on his doorstep with tears in her eyes, day after day.

“It was cruel, Clay.”

“What you did was cruel too.”

The living room was quiet, empty aside from the pair of them, standing locked in stalemate. Clay could hear the drip of the plates, drying on the rack in the kitchen, the hum of the fridge. His heart was steady though, his head clear. He half wanted to be angry, but he felt too empty.

“You just cut me out of your life, Clay. I know I fucked up, but to just cut me off. That was cruel.” Hannah spoke so softly, her eyes shy as she tucked a strand of bright hair behind her ear.

“I’m sorry,” Clay’s tone matched hers and he hated himself for it. Hated how gentle he’d become, all his hate slinking away to leave him defenceless. “I didn’t want to but I had to.” Their eyes met and Clay felt as though his heart had just been dropped from a great height. “I didn’t want to hurt you, Han, but you just wouldn’t leave me alone. Aren’t you happy I did it? Cut you off? Hasn’t it been good to move on?”

“It just hurt, that’s all.” The jumper she wore was a little too big and her hands had tucked themselves under the cuffs. It was so familiar, that little motion. Clay remembered all the times he’d held her hand in his, pulled her wrist free of the fabric and wrapped their fingers together. “I missed you, Clay. I missed you a lot.”

“I’m sorry,” Clay took a deep breath, as deep as he could with his chest so tight. “But you knew I’d do that, break up with you, cut you off. Anything else, we could’ve talked it over, we could’ve

worked it out but that was the line.”

“Clay-”

“Hannah, please,” Clay didn’t care how broken he sounded, not anymore. She knew anyway. She always knew. “You crossed the line, you didn’t make a mistake, you *chose* to cheat, it fucked me up.” Clay’s voice cracked, his throat suddenly dry. “It fucked me up so bad Hannah, you don’t even know.”

He remembered. He remembered why for all these months he hadn’t even dared to think about the break-up. This was why. This impossible gaping emptiness that had opened up inside of him, that had always been there ever since Hannah had done what she did. It seemed illogical that time could be split so cleanly in two. The time before when he was loved and whole. When he was worth something to someone, when he’d had a future with Hannah, love, a reason to be with her. Then, the time after. When he was nothing. Nothing but an absence. A hole of a person. Not enough. Never enough. Just a handful of memories stitched together with bitterness, kept standing through forced apathy and a gradual climb back into feeling. Still, the higher he climbed, the greater the distance he had to fall and now Clay felt as though he was falling all over again.

“I’m so sorry, Clay.”

“Yeh, I’m sorry too. I’m sorry it happened.” Clay longed for petty rage. For something burning and destructive. It didn’t come. “It hurt me more than you’ll ever know.”

“I do know.” Hannah nodded earnestly, her eyes glossy. “I do know Clay, I understand.”

“No, you don’t.” Clay was already half turned away, his feet aching for the door, “If you knew, you wouldn’t have done it. And then we’d still be together” He choked on his last words, Hannah’s big blue eyes letting loose a single tear as she stared up at him. “But we’re not.”

The corridor Clay walked down seemed to stretch for miles, and by the time he got to the door of the bedroom, he felt as though he was about to collapse. The room felt cold, empty and hollow and Clay longed for George, longed to fall into his friend’s arms and cry until his head burst. But he wasn’t there. So Clay simply buried his head into the cool pillows and waited for his lonely tears to fall. They never came.

The pillow smelt of George’s shampoo. Sweet artificial coconut, straight out of a cheap supermarket bottle. It was hopelessly comforting and Clay breathed in the scent until his heart felt like it belonged in his chest again. His mind gave him a moment of peace before frustration rose like bile in his throat.

It was a belated bite of anger, little use to him now in this empty room, more hatred at himself than Hannah. Hannah and her soft eyes and her sweet voice and that gentle laugh that bubbled up like she couldn’t stop it from escaping her mouth. It was horrifically unfair, the way she lived so

prevalently in his mind, curling around the corners of his brain, brought to life through layers of memories, endlessly overlapping to fill the darkness every time he closed his eyes.

He was just so desperate for peace. He wanted to feel safe and warm, wanted to capture the elusive feeling of being *okay* ; except the more he lingered on it, the more unobtainable it seemed. When was the last time he felt true calm? Before he fought with George, before he flew out to Bali? Maybe a month ago, before Hannah had stumbled back into his life with that message? The answer taunted him, direct and unpleasant. *Nine months ago*. When he had Hannah.

Clay was so sick of it, sick of it all, and in that drowsy moment, face buried in sheets, all he wanted was a respite. So when an idea came to him, a weak and juvenile, he didn't ignore it. He clung to it, prodding at the concept with his desperate mind. Wouldn't it be wrong? Wrong to cross this line, to do something so explicit in a shared space? Clay's head *hurt* , but when he rolled over, his eyes caught on the door of the bathroom and the ideas refused to let him go. Was it wrong to do this at all, to seek shelter in something empty, a desperate defence against the ache inside? Did he care?

His legs didn't seem to. They swung off the bed, treading mindless steps. Mindless was *good* . It was thinking that had got him into this mess so he kept walking across that hardwood floor until the bathroom door swung shut behind him, offering a sense of finality with its quiet *click* . Anger rose, next to shame, next to apathy, and it was all becoming so much, so quickly. Clay reached out a clammy hand and swung the lid of the toilet shut, sitting on the makeshift seat. Too much. His hand twitched inadvertently as his mind fought with itself. Was this the right thing to do? *What the fuck else can I do?*

His hand answered the question for him, slipping under his shorts to palm at himself through the fabric of his underwear. Clay hadn't even meant to move, yet he watched the muscles in his arm shift, through heavy-lidded eyes, and the next breath he let loose came as a hiss through his clenched teeth.

He felt desperate, his hand moving faster, wallowing in the drag of rough cloth against his sensitive skin. Clay's head was empty, free of Hannah, free of anything except dense air and heavy moments of comforting pleasure. His hands shook as he fumbled with his shorts, pulling away layers of fabric to let his dick rise free. The rush of air was welcome but did nothing to dispel the dusky pink colouring, as the pale skin flushed with hot blood, begging to be touched. It had been *days* . Long stressful anxious *days* and so it took only a small moment before Clay moved once more.

Torturously slow, his trembling hand reached forward to wrap around the base of his cock. He dragged his fingers up feeling the organ stiffen, tight enough that the rough drag of skin forced a sigh from his mouth; a heady sound that had been sitting on his tongue for days. He'd missed this, missed this as if he'd been swimming underwater and at last, he'd been allowed to breach the surface, air gracing his lungs in a greedy gulp, allowing all the breaths he'd been dreaming of

taking to crowd themselves down his throat.

There was still a part of him that was tense, legs stiff as his ears listened for the slightest sound of George returning from his walk, but despite that, there was something close to tranquillity in this small window. His mind emptied even further with every languid stroke, his hand moving in an intuitive glide. The flaxen sun pushed through the translucent window and Clay let himself linger in the warm delight of the moment, his mind wallowing in pleasure. If this was how he got his peace, some filthy indulgence in a cold white bathroom, then so be it.

So be it . He thought to himself, as his tongue moved out to wet his lip in a nervous flick, his trembling hand dragging across his skin, grazing over veins in a senseless hunt for gratification. His eyes flickered shut, the image of his hand moving in swift strokes down his dick trapping itself under his lids. The breaths he drew were esurient and they caught in his throat, making little choked sounds in the quiet.

Each obliging drag pushed him further into reprieve, each shift of his hand an involuntary indulgence, provoking a curl of hazy heat that gathered in his gut like mist on a moor. Like it belonged there. Like it had never left at all. Still, his empty mind begged for something more, so Clay abandoned the sweet isolation to think once more.

His thoughts dragged themselves together to think of a woman. A nameless faceless figure that knelt before him, her hands twisting around his dick with a sure and steady movement, eyes bright and eager, locked only on *him* . For a moment it was perfect, and Clay breathed out a rough sigh of content, but as soon as he tried to cling on to the vision, it was warping, changing, slipping out of his grasp to become Hannah. Hannah and him in the back of his car. Alone in a fast food car park, her hand wrapped tightly around his dick, his jeans crumpled around his ankles. He could see her, clear as ever, a smile lingering on her lips as she leant into him, the soft curve of her breast highlighted by the lights outside the window. He could almost feel the seat of his car against his back, feel the fear and excitement rising inside him, mixing with desire.

Clay's eyes snapped open. He jerked his head to the side, as though trying to physically expel the memory, yet he couldn't help but remember that night, as clear as ever. It was burnt in his brain, the excitement at the forbiddenness of it all, Hannah so bright and eager and daring, elation personified. He remembered her licking his cum off of her hand after he'd finished her tongue swirling around the digits, her eyes shining. Clay jolted, heat flaring low in his stomach, an unmistakable mark of want. He was still achingly hard.

With a swell of resentment, he swiped his thumb absentmindedly across the head of his cock, collecting a bead of pre-cum to smear back down the shaft. He let his eyes fall shut, concentrating on the chill of the tiles under his feet, the chirping of birds creeping in through the open window. It was better to focus on the here and now, the real and tangible rather than the corporeal thoughts that snared themselves around his brain. He hadn't *meant* to think of her. But the memory had

snuck its way in and now there was a bitter bite of fear lapping at him. It had been months since he had pictured anything like that, his mind had offered him peace in that aspect, keeping thoughts like those locked away in some shameful secret place, hiding who he used to be under layers of distractions.

Distractions . Clay's mind was tenuously empty now, so he reached for a new fantasy, a more carefully constructed one that wouldn't betray him. He pictured a boy. A man. A pale, lean figure who painted himself on the inside of Clay's eyelids to kneel on the floor before him. A faceless blur, yet somehow still shockingly beautiful in the way he moved, willing and eager, his hands shifting to wrap around Clay's dick. Clay wondered what it would be like to hold a man like that. To wrap his arms around that slender body, pale skin taught over sharp collarbones and wide shoulders, meagre wrappings of muscle and fat; coarse hair in contradiction to soft skin that was begging to be bruised with the roughness of a hungry mouth.

Clay's eyes flickered beneath his lids, a breath hissed from between his teeth as he tugged at his cock, the action creeping towards something desperate and mindless. His mind was infuriatingly ignorant, lagging behind as his imagination raced on, skating over the gaps in his knowledge. Would it be *so* different with a man? Would they know how to tease him, how to take him apart? They could treat each other with roughness, not idle compassion but something forceful, needy. Want portrayed by bruising grips, biting lips and desperate whines that echoed in Clay's mind like a half-remembered love song.

Just a few strokes, a little teasing around the head, and he was so painfully hard now, worried he would spill into his hand. He bit at his lip, forceful enough that flesh flushed under his teeth. How would that man look, on the floor between his legs? Dark eyes rising to meet his face, then falling back to his crotch, gaze heavy with desire and devotion, shameless, not trying to shield all that want, to hide from him, to lie to him with guarded eyes.

Clay let his head fall back, a groan tearing itself from his lips as his hand moved faster and faster. To want and be wanted in equal measure was an addicting fantasy. It made his stomach twist and his ears beat heavy with blood. The man in his mind was electric. A collage of something beautiful, patched together from fragments dredged from the corners of his mind. Molten greed fed his movements as Clay dragged the rough pads of his fingers across the head of his dick. He could feel his pulse echoing in his palm, involuntarily tightening his grip as his cock throbbed.

Impatience pushed the fantasy along as Clay's breath came in frantic pants. He pictured the man dropping his head down, teasing him with a hint of warm breath, before meeting the top of Clay's cock with a kiss. The filthy juxtaposition tore a groan from Clay's mouth as the heat in his stomach grew, as though someone was stoking burning coals just above his gut, yanking out organs and replacing them with nothing but *want* . His eyelids flickered as he thought of how that soft mouth would feel swallowing his head, the plush tongue lapping at the sensitive skin. Drooling down his shaft, lips stretched. Clay ghosted his fingertips across his dick, setting every nerve alight, teasing himself in a mirror of the man in his mind. Tracing the same route as he imagined that tongue carving out: pulling out the moment of pleasure, making time elastic.

He longed to bury his hands in short soft hair, to bring the man closer down onto his cock until he was almost choking on it. Longed to make those doe eyes leak with tears, to feel him gag around him. *Ached* to revel in that selfish delectation, to know that the man was there for *him* . Was willing and pliant with an aching jaw and bruised mouth for no one but *him* .

With a muffled grunt, Clay came. It was a choked, desperate sound of rapture and *need* that made blood rush to his cheeks, ashamed at the wantonness of it all. He curled over, feeling the sticky mess cooling on his hand, splattered on his shirt and leaking onto his bare thighs. The bathroom felt so very quiet without the blood thundering in his ears and for a moment a streak of shame crept in with the silence. He didn't know he'd wanted *that* . Wanted it so badly that a nebulous fantasy had him shuddering into his fist.

The haze that had clouded him for so long was dissolving, the fire abating, dying down into nothing but the remnant of smouldering coals. Losing its urgency but leaving the memory, a touch of heat still alive on his skin. His boneless hand sought the roll of toilet paper, by his side, practicality fueling his motions as he cleaned up, each harsh wipe a reprimand for his greed. He couldn't say he felt regret though, that was too blatant of a lie to even let it echo in his head. Clay felt *better* , his mind had quieted, his chest didn't ache with the same tightness it had before. It was peace, found in the arms of a vague reverie, a man that still lingered in ghostly beauty behind his lids. He hoped he would stay. He liked that man.

Clay left the bathroom, swinging the door shut behind him and turning to flop back onto the bed. His eyes tracked the lazy sunlight streaming through the window, catching on specks of dust as it dappled onto the hardwood floor. The rich brown turned to honeyed gold as the warm light touched it and unbidden, the memory of George's eyes flooded into Clay's mind. Their dark depths were the spitting image of the warm wood. They too glowed in sunlight.

As soon as he'd found a touch of quiet, it slipped from his grasp again; thoughts were running parallel to ideas that they shouldn't be. Everything was blurring and overlapping at a sickening pace and Clay felt his face flush with shame as he remembered that memory, that night he'd dredged up from the depths. It was pathetic. As soon as he'd let his mind wander, his thoughts raced back to Hannah, like an unruly pet running home to its master. Maybe it was an effect of the accusations George had hurled his way, the fact she'd been so heavy on his mind. Either way, maybe it was time he finally thought about her, forced himself to tackle everything he'd been suppressing for so long.

For some reason, the bed felt much larger than usual, lonely and cold without George, George who was always so dwarfed by the thick covers, George and his dark eyes, clumsy hands that would rub roughly at his face in the morning. After only two days of sharing this space, Clay didn't know how he was ever going to go back to an empty bed again.

Maybe it was time he talked to George, properly. There was always going to be that fear of judgement, that worry that he was too much of a coward to be worthy of being such a huge part of George's life, but that was never going to fade. Honesty hadn't hurt him today, and he could trust George, he *could*.

Still, the courage curling in Clay's chest felt like a fallacy, felt like all the other lies he'd told himself before. Confusion hung around him like a heavy smog, and he breathed in the warm air of the bedroom, too befuddled to unravel the hows and whys in this sun-soaked moment. It was easier, so much easier to watch the sun as it pierced the window drenching the room in light, and think of George.

Chapter End Notes

!!SFW SUMMARY FOR THOSE WHO SKIPPED!! (fuck I hate writing summaries, please appreciate this)

Clay masturbates in the bathroom (hey, we all cope in diff ways), and during this, he accidentally thinks of his ex-girlfriend in a past intimate moment. The fool understands that's A Bad Thing, so instead directs his thoughts to an anonymous man and uses that fantasy to finish. You, the nimble-minded reader may notice that the man he thinks about looks just a little like George. Clay doesn't realise this and that is because he is An Idiot.

God this chapter has been fucking me up for so long, but I rlly rlly hope y'all enjoyed. This fic has somehow, embarrassingly, become something quite special to me (u wouldn't think based off my update schedule) so I apprecatite every one of you that has stuck around to read it. Like woaw, 10 chapters?? 48k words?? And we're nowhere near done?? Just, *mwah*. I appreciet y'all sm<3

ALSO, confession time, this is the first bit o' smut I ever wrote. Originally typed it up in August, then essentially rewrote it. However, I'm still claiming it as my first and thus begging for reviews. Get ur criticism hats on, I want to see y'all ANALYSING the dick to cock ratio, digging through the connotations of every filthy word. I wanna know if my shit's decent, cos man, what a flex that would be. You may have your life together, but I can write porn and what's more, IT'S GOOD!

Anyways, catch y'all in the next one, which will, ofc, be a wonderful return to angst (but fluffy also) (like, I think it's sweet)

p.s If you're liking this mess of a fic (I say this with affection), then please leave a kudos. A lot of readers on this site find new fics through sorting by kudos and high numbers give me validation, thank you!!

p.p.s Also follow me on twitter- [@LolaL1kes](#) (it means you get content between updates, ooh, how exciting)

A Call, a Cat and a Quiet Confession

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone- long time no see (sry abt that)

This is actually the first of TWO chapters I'll be posting today- so after you've finished chapter 11, you can read right onto chapter 12 (consider that my apology for the unannounced hiatus).

I hope you enjoy, and it's so good to be back *mwah*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The cat had shown up on the second day. It'd been a lazy afternoon, with puddles still drying on the muddy ground when she'd slunk into the garden, under Clay's watchful gaze, her slender tail arched in a question mark. Bali was full of stray animals, a whole array of collarless cats and dogs, so it was no surprise when she arrived, stepping with delicate paws around the pool. He'd fed her scraps of his dinner as the sun sunk low, and in return she'd kept him company in the lonely evening, listening to the songs of the cicadas, curled up at his feet. She was still too wary to jump into his lap, but she let him stroke her tawny fur and had greeted him at sunrise to share breakfast. It was as though the animal could sense his loneliness. George hadn't been *avoiding* him, but he had been distant, dodging Clay's looks and leaving him to wake up alone in a rumpled bed that felt far too large.

And now, it was evening again, and the days already felt as though they were rolling into one long expanse of solitude, an unfolding ache so helplessly entangled in guilt it was hard to feel self-pity. George would come around. Eventually. Clay would say the right thing, or their laughter would mingle in some sunny afternoon and all would be well again. But for now, he was fettered to his isolation, alone except for the stray cat, still curled on the flagstones at his feet.

Hannah and Leo were out, Clay had watched them drive away a few hours ago, their rental car stirring the grit of the driveway. Hannah had been subdued as she told Clay about their plans to spend an evening in the city, but Leo was his usual affable self. This, of course, had pushed Clay into spiralling speculation over the closeness of their relationship, and he'd spent almost twenty minutes on one of the plush cream couches, staring blankly at the living room wall, lost in contemplation.

That was what had occupied him for the rest of the evening. *Thinking*. One of the drawbacks of catching up on sleep was that Clay's thoughts were no longer a sluggish mess; they now raced ahead of him, examining every emotion lurking under the curve of his ribs. They would dash to Hannah, teasing out every intimate memory, tying the hush of the wind to the whisper of her voice and reminding him how her skin felt under the touch of his hands. Then, once his unruly mind was tired of that brand of abuse, it would slink back to George. *George hates you, you hurt him. Here's how George looks with tears in his eyes. Here's how he sounds when you break him.*

That was all his thoughts ever seemed to be, in these lonely, sun-drenched hours. Hannah and George. George and Hannah.

Clay's phone buzzed, and he started, so shocked by the sound he jumped. The cat at his feet gave a sound of protest before trotting away down the steps, tail swishing in indignation. Clay offered a hushed apology to her retreating figure, but she seemed more interested in the watery light reflecting off the pool.

With an irritated sigh, Clay dug into the pocket of his shorts. He hadn't touched his phone in hours, and he distinctly remembered restricting his notifications, which meant the only thing it could be was...

A text. From *Nick*.

Nick: I had to PAY MONEY to send this overseas. Check discord you shithead.

Clay's thumbs tapped at his phone, eagerly checking discord. He had to bite back a smile at Nick's clear indignation, reminding himself of the seriousness of their last interaction.

Sapnap: I WAS IA

Sapnap: AND I HAD A FUCKING CALL WITH GEORGE, IK WHAT'S GOING ON

Sapnap: Ik we need to talk

Sapnap: I'm literally free to call now istg

You missed a call from Sapnap

Sapnap: Who's not picking up now, you fuck

You missed a call from Sapnap

You missed a call from Sapnap

You missed a call from Sapnap

The display stretched on and on, missed calls mixing with expletives and an impressive variety of insults. Clay jabbed blindly at the call button, his curiosity re-igniting as he remembered why he'd been so anxious to get in contact with his friend.

George and Hannah. And Nick. Who had lied? How long would Clay have to fight before he got his hands on the *truth*?

The dialling tone had barely sounded before Nick answered, his greeting more of a yell than anything discernable. "Ooh, call me, call me," Nick's voice was a bellow, an asinine laugh clouding the end of his words. "You fucking *bombard* my phone with notifications, even though I was *offline*-"

"No you weren't." Clay's voice was practically a whisper next to Nick's frenzied chatter, but Nick still went quiet, leaving a pause before his response.

"I was out with my family all of yesterday, I just woke up, it's crazy early."

"What time is it?"

"Just past six."

Clay made a small noise of dissent.

"I genuinely haven't been able to talk, but you still leave that many messages, you called me on my phone for fuck's sake, that costs *money*-"

"You were online when I sent them." Clay hated how sullen he sounded. "And I really need to talk to you, I've been losing my fucking mind."

"Well I *might've* been online when you sent them, doesn't mean I saw anything." Nick paused. Clay could almost *hear* him deliberating. "I was on a call with George, super late a couple of nights ago but then I had to go to bed right after. That was the last time I was online, and I didn't even see your messages, I swear."

"Wait, when was that?"

"George said you two had just had breakfast when he called. He was off walking somewhere, listen, Clay-"

Clay let out a heavy sigh. The sweat on his face had collected onto the screen of his phone, so he switched sides, pressing the tacky glass against his other cheek. "Sapnap, I don't care. I just need you to explain this whole thing. Please."

The cat was still by the side of the pool, following a browning leaf as it floated atop the water. Her tail flicked from side to side and Clay tracked the motion with heavy-lidded eyes. He was *exhausted*, so utterly tired and confused over the whole situation, and perhaps some of that had leaked into his voice because when Nick spoke next there was not a trace of aggression in his tone.

"I'm sorry, Clay." It was Nick's turn to sigh. The line crackled as it transmitted the heavy breath. "I already told George everything-"

"George hasn't been talking to me." Clay's voice had grown even quieter. It was an effort to speak.

"I know, and that's kinda my fault-"

“It’s *my* fault.”

“No it *isn’t*,” Nick’s laugh was a reassuring huff, but it still made Clay’s stomach curl. “Listen, he told me about the argument, but that shit *happens*, friends fight. Like, how many times have we argued about the *stupidest* things? Remember when we were twelve? You blocked me on skype over *minecraft kits*, said you weren’t ever gonna talk to me again?”

Clay couldn’t help the laugh that crept past his lips. It mingled with Nick’s quiet chuckle, their amusement matched despite the distance between them.

As soon as Clay stopped laughing, the guilt crept back in again and he shook his head, voice sombre as he responded. “This is pretty different though, I said some *fucked up stuff*.”

“It happens. Friends fight.”

“I made him cry, Nick. He was crying, fucking two steps away from me and I couldn’t even hug him, because I was the dick that *made him cry*.”

“Listen, Clay,” Nick’s voice sounded slightly muffled, as though his face was up against his hand. “He wouldn’t have even picked a fight if I hadn’t been an idiot, I need to explain.”

“Yes, yes you do.”

“Okay,” Nick took a deep breath. “You remember that night, that night I called you and told you about my gran.”

“Mhmm.”

“After you hung up, went to sleep, I just felt so fucking bad. I know you said it would all be fine but I just got so worried. You’d be out there alone for a month, a whole month, and *Hannah*-”

Clay protested, but Nick cut him off.

“I *know* you said it’d be alright, but I *cared*. I saw what she did to you the first time, and I was already so worried over my gran, I wasn’t thinking straight.”

The line fell silent. All Clay could hear were Nick’s unsteady breaths.

“Nick...” His voice wavered. “What did you do?”

“I called George up,” Nick spoke quickly, as though scared if he slowed down he’d never get out the words he needed. “I called George up, I told him about my gran, explained what had happened and begged him to go with you.”

“You didn’t need to-”

“I knew you wouldn’t ask him yourself, so I called him up and I *begged*. I think I unpacked and re-packed my suitcase around five times while I was talking to him, just *trying*...” Nick wasn’t speaking quite so rapidly anymore and Clay could hear a choked sort of emotion creep its way in, clouding his friend’s voice.

“I just wanted everything to be okay, I *needed* it. If I couldn’t help my family, then for fucks sake, I could help my friend.” Nick cleared his throat, his words sounding a little more even when he started talking again. “But George wouldn’t budge, and I don’t blame him, to be fair. He’d gotten the impression he wasn’t wanted and fuck as if anyone was gonna change that idea. He didn’t *want*

to go. Or maybe he did and he was just too damn proud, but *god*.” Nick paused for breath. “I just needed it to all be okay. You get that, right Clay?”

Clay couldn’t see the cat anymore. Maybe she’d left the garden, or maybe she was still there, hiding one of the dark shadows, pulled from the looming trees. He felt numb, and when he spoke, his voice matched that feeling with perfect arctic emphasis.

“So you told him I was in love with Hannah.”

The sigh at the end of his sentence blended seamlessly with the rush of wind crowding the garden.

“You understand why.” Nick too was toneless, indulging in the refuge of a simple sentence.

“Explain it to me, why don’t you?” Guilt had already snared itself around Clay’s lungs, but he indulged in one last attempt to shift a fraction of the blame. “I’d love to know why you *lied*.”

“He wouldn’t have gone if I hadn’t.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I *do*.”

Clay’s tongue couldn’t trip itself into action in time to argue, so Nick pressed on. “He’s too fucking stubborn, too proud. He wouldn’t step outside his comfort zone for something as *small* as providing you *support*, especially since you’d both been off with each other since the trip came up.”

“We were alright.”

“Not like you used to be.” Nick’s voice was crowded with inflections. “I’ll take partial responsibility for your fight, but be honest. That shit was building for a long time.”

Clay took a sharp breath, itching to talk. Nick didn’t let him.

“I’m sorry for any part I played in you and George... In the way you guys have been off recently. I’m sorry. I felt *so bad* that night, and you just sounded so upset and I couldn’t think of anything else to do. I’ll admit it was wrong, but it’s worked out, you know it has.”

“I thought I hid it pretty well.” Clay ran a hand roughly through his hair. “How upset I was, that is.”

“No,” Nick laughed, a bitter sound. “You didn’t.”

They were silent for a moment, then Nick, clearly emboldened by Clay’s lack of dissension, stumbled on. “I’m sorry man, but I just kept thinking about all the shit Hannah did to you, and how excited you were to go to Bali, and I knew George would go if I pushed him, and then you could still have all that.” Nick was tripping over his words, his justifications crowding on his tongue. “So I did it. I pushed him. And I’ll say sorry for hurting what you two have, but not for doing what I had to, as a friend.”

“You *had* to lie, did you?” Clay’s utterance was glacial. Nick gave a quiet mumble, his attempt at an anodyne response.

“I could’ve coped on my own, you know that, I told you-”

“But you didn’t *have to*. All it took was a little persuasion-”

“You *lied!* You just outright fucking *lied*, that’s not-”

“Was it a lie?” Nick snapped. “Can you say that? Can you tell me that’s a lie?”

“Yes! I don’t love Hannah.” And then all of a sudden, Clay’s voice was soft and his tone became the complete antithesis of the words he was trying to express. “I *don’t*.”

“I told George you loved Hannah. I told him you’d admitted how hard it was, how much everything hurt and how you never would have coped seeing her alone. I told him you missed her, you wanted her. That she was everything to you and the only way you’d managed was because you’d never been forced to reconcile with what you’d lost.”

The dim garden was awfully quiet. Every word Nick spoke sat in grim contrast to the silence twisting into Clay’s brain. He wanted to put the phone down, but his hand was too numb to move.

“So explain to me, Clay. If that’s not the truth, then why did George find it so easy to believe? And why did I find it so easy to say, to make it fit with everything that’s been happening? And why aren’t you denying it?”

“Do I need to?” Clay’s throat was far too tight. The words that had managed to squeeze their way out sounded small and smothered. “It’s not true.”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I hadn’t thought it was true. At least to an extent.”

“You said you were desperate, you would’ve said anything to get George to go.”

Nick sighed. “I still think it’s true.”

It had gotten to that point in the evening where nothing was quite visible anymore. The familiar shapes Clay had mapped during the day were nothing but a monochrome blur, a dim expanse of hazy blues, melted into ambiguity by the dusk. Nothing was real outside of the glow of the pool and the solid patio chair Clay sat on, there were no consequences or judgments to be found, nothing but light debris on the skin of the pool and the cool kiss of wind on the nape of his neck. Declarations were easy, so Clay confessed, speaking into the white noise of the call.

“I thought about her the other day.”

“What about her?” Nick asked, as though he already knew the answer.

“How it felt to be with her, how much I fucking loved her, how I wanted her. I remembered how easily she took me apart, broke me down then built me up and told me that I needed her.” Clay bit at his lip. “I *did* need her.”

“Clay...” Nick was breathless.

“I don't love her. I've thought a lot about that in the last few day's, in the last month, I suppose. I don't love her. She's cruel and she brings out the worst in me and I wish I could just move on and forget all about her. But I can't. I can't forget what she used to mean to me.” The garden was staunchly insubstantial, that one shade of murky blue pressing up against his open eyes. “I can't forget how much I want her.”

“Clay...” Nick groaned, his voice a sound of pure defeat. It was as though he was incapable of saying anything except a name, cramming all his disbelief and disapproval into a single syllable.

“Well done, I guess.” Clay bit at his lip. “I'm not *over her*. Exes stick around sometimes. When you let someone that far into your life, they tend to leave a mark, who would've thought.” His tone dripped with sarcasm. “Guess there's something else you can tell George.”

“I think I'll let you tell him that yourself.” Nick had reclaimed his ability to string together sentences. “And I know exes stick around sometimes, but you did tell us you were fine.”

“I guess that's why the three of us are such good friends. We're all a bunch of fucking liars.”

Clay switched the phone to his other hand again, letting his free arm fall, his fingers moving to pick at the seam of his jeans. Part of him had wanted to tell Nick about yesterday, about the way Hannah had crept into his thoughts, exactly *how* he'd been brought to the conclusion that he wanted her. It felt too heavy though, too personal and secret. Enough had been shared, too much shame had been pushed onto Clay already.

“You *do* need to tell George all this,” Nick spoke with quiet finality and Clay's stomach sank a little at the words. He knew his friend was right.

“I don't want to complicate things, I've only just got him to accept that I'm not *in love* with her.”

“Don't worry, he knows that now. He got pretty mad at me actually, madder than you.”

“Most people don't like being lied to, Nick.”

Nick chuckled. “Tell George the truth then.”

“I haven't been *lying* to him,” Clay's teeth jutted out to worry at the skin of his lip. “Just... Withholding the extent of my attachment.”

“Tell him that then. But from what I've heard, your issue is a lack of trust and respect. Telling him something like this would prove that you *do* need him as a friend, that you do have faith in him, that you *can* rely on him. He's not stupid, he knows the difference between love and leftover heartache, so trust him. Tell him this shit. You can't take back what you said, but you can do *better* and make it up to him.”

Clay forced a laugh, trying to disguise the way Nick's words had ripped through him. “When did you get all mature and shit?”

“It's the ranch life, it really gives you perspective.” Nick chuckled along with him, and all at once, the seriousness of the conversation dissolved.

“So how are you going to make this all up to *me*?” Clay asked, his tone suffused with a smile.

“What?”

“Lying like you did.”

“Oh fuck off, I said sorry.” Nick stifled a yawn. “Besides it’s worked out great, I’m sure you and George are very convincing.”

“We seem to be.” Clay thought back to that long conversation he’d had with Scott and Anaya, how everything he’d expressed about George had seemed so *real*, how the lies had been so easy to tell.

“You two wouldn’t have even had to change anything at all, I swear you already act like boyfriends.” Nick’s tone was nonchalant, his words casual, but Clay still felt his face fall, the lazy grin on his face slipping away.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know what I *mean*.” Nick groaned.

Clay gave no response, his fidgeting hand suddenly still as the night sky solidified its hold on the skyline.

“You two spend *so* much time with each other, flirt like all the fucking time-”

Clay cut him off with a laugh. “That’s not flirting, that’s just *being friends*. We tease each other, we joke around.”

“It’s different with you two.”

“What, cos we’re both gay you *assume*-”

“Clay, don’t be like that-”

“Like what?” Clay knew he sounded affronted, but he didn’t care. His patience was thin. “I joke around with most of my friends, you don’t make comments about my relationships with *them*.”

“I *do*.”

“Not serious comments, this sounds serious.”

“It isn’t, Clay, I’m messing with you.” Nick let out a laugh. It sounded forced. “Besides, you’re not gay, you’re bi.”

“It’s an *umbrella term*.” Clay let his shoulders slump. The evening was getting cold. “I know you didn’t mean anything by it though, it’s alright. I’m just...”

Clay let his voice trail off, unsure if he could even put his twist of emotions into words.

“I get it.” Nick’s voice was soft, cajoling.

“And of course, I still hold a deep underlying hatred for you, so everything you say irritates me.”

“Because I lied?”

“Yes,” Clay hoped the smile on his face transmitted through the phone. “I’ll forgive you in a year

or so, but until then, I expect you to be on your best behaviour.”

“That sounds kinda boring. How about *instead*, I tell George you wanna fuck Hannah?”

“I don’t-”

Nick wasn’t even listening. His laugh sounded, loud in the quiet of the evening, a deep cacophony of wheezes. Clay couldn’t help it. He laughed too.

It felt good to sit, to enjoy company untainted by the heaviness of secrets or the constraint of regret. Nick was just a friend. A friend who made mistakes, just like him, and who forgave him in equal measure. A friend he could tease and taunt, laugh comfortably with in the cool of the gloaming, who wasn’t a mere handful of metres away, curled in a shared bed and draped in a million expectations and unanswered questions. A friend who wasn’t George.

After Clay and Nick had swallowed their laughter, they drifted through casual conversation, lingering on lighter topics, almost conspicuously avoiding everything they’d spoken about before. It wasn’t long before Nick’s family had risen, forcing him out of bed and off the call. He’d given Clay a cheery farewell before hanging up, as well as a stern reminder to “Talk to George, goddamnit.” That left Clay little choice except to brood by the pool, or spur himself into activity and at least *talk* to his friend. That, he could do. There was little reason George would still be annoyed with him, not after Nick’s confession and besides, Clay missed him.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, ahhhhh, a second big apology for being away for so long. Writing is fun, and I adore and appreciate everyone who reads my fics- so I genuinely feel bad leaving you hanging for so long. I just hope I can slip back into this and get back to where I was cos I genuinely I am still inspired by this story.

Secondly, easter egg I put in just for me,
When Sapnap talks abt this: *"...how many times have we argued about the stupidest things? Remember when we were twelve? You blocked me on skype over minecraft kits, said you weren't ever gonna talk to me again?"*

[That's actually a true story!!!](#) Dream and Sapnap talked about it in a steam agessss back- it was just a small thing I remembered when writing and I wanted to include it for a cute reference- tho it probably exposes me as an absolute veteran of this community

Anyways, hope y'all enjoy the next chpt

Atonement

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to all my touch-starved bitches. I'm not liable for any feelings of loneliness, isolation or general angst my writing provokes- not my fault no one cuddles you <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay made his way back into the house, treading with unsteady strides. Thankfully, Hannah and Leo were still out, leaving the wood-panelled living room a quiet place to collect his thoughts. Whichever way he looked at the situation, Nick remained frustratingly *right*. Right about Hannah and George and the confusing tangle of emotions Clay had found himself in. In spite of his hesitation, he found himself turning away from the front door, looking down the hallway, his eyes focusing on the end.

The route to Clay's room was gradually becoming familiar, the closed door simultaneously a welcome and foreboding sight. He paused, just outside, his hand hovering above the handle until his fingers began to shake. George had been so cold over the past day. There was a reason why Clay had found better company in a stray cat, and while Nick's words had fostered a sense of bravery, the looming awkwardness seemed almost too much to face. Yet, despite all that, Clay missed George. He wanted to laugh with him, see him disarmed by the weariness of the evening. He wanted to make him blush and smile and *understand*.

It was that last thought which offered Clay enough courage to let his hand fall, yet when he stepped inside the room, he found it empty. He looked around the deserted space, a little confused, until he noticed the muffled sound of running water, creeping through the bathroom door. George was in the shower.

Clay forced himself to relax, a little relieved at the delay of the inevitable as he bent down to unlace his trainers. As his breathing steadied, his eyes went back to sweeping around the room. *Their* room. It, like the rest of the house, had developed a comfortable feel albeit to a greater extent. It was nowhere near as messy as Clay's room back home, but the clutter had begun to build as their belongings merged. It seemed as if their possessions were doing a better job of getting along than they were.

Yesterday, Clay had dragged the carved desk over from the spare room, and it sat awkwardly in the corner, obstructing the edge of the french windows with its unwieldy shape. Clay's laptop sat atop the varnished wood, along with a modest tangle of wires and a lone takeout container, that was sure to collect companions in the upcoming weeks. George's laptop was lying on the unmade bed, but Clay moved the bulky thing to George's bedside table before lying down on the bed,

turning towards the window. The night was dark, but the porchlight illuminated a pair of George's trainers as they hung, swinging from one of the porch beams, casting wild shadows. The shoes had likely gotten soaked in one of the many puddles and they'd been left to dry, swaying in the wind alongside the bugs flocking to the light.

Clay ignored the subtle noises emanating from the bathroom as his eyes continued dancing around the room, the casual movement a purposeful distraction. Their clothes had been emptied into the wardrobe and the draws at the bottom were a little ajar, letting unfolded hoodies and shirts sprawl out. Clay's suitcase had become a laundry basket, George's, a table. The surface was cluttered with a mass of belongings, a phone that was George's, a book that was Clay's and it was almost ironic that whilst Clay felt more distant from his friend than ever before, their belongings had meshed together seamlessly. It was ironic until it began to hurt and Clay's chest cried out in protest at the thought of how *together* could've been *home*.

Clay heard the bathroom door open, and he shifted around on the bed, suddenly alert as he got clumsily to his feet. George's hair was sodden from the shower, his pale shirt turning translucent at the shoulders as water dripped down. He didn't seem surprised to see Clay, offering him a feeble smile as he left the bathroom.

"Hi." Clay stood, a little awkwardly as George deposited the clothes he was holding into their designated suitcase-laundry-basket.

"Hi. I thought I heard you come in."

They surveyed each other for a brief moment, their eyes locking across the room. Then, just as Clay was about to say something, anything to shatter the discomfort lurking in the air, George seemed to bolster himself, stumbling into speech.

"It's good you're back actually, I kinda needed your help with something."

"Oh?" Clay was too disarmed to even try to mask his curiosity as George stepped back around the room, leading him into the bathroom.

The small white space greeted Clay with a wave of humidity as George picked something up off the counter, turning to face him with a frown.

"The plug sockets are different. I can't use my shaver."

"You use electric?" Clay asked, holding out his hand for the cord.

"Yes," George's mouth twisted into a slight pout as Clay examined the unusual plug. It had a pair of dual prongs that clearly wouldn't fit into the socket on the wall.

"Did you not bring an adaptor?" Clay asked.

"Well, *obviously* not." George sighed. "I bought a bunch of adapters for the regular plugs, but in England, we have different sockets in the bathroom, and I never thought to get one for my shaver. I don't even *need* the cable to use it, it's just for charging, but the battery ran out and I didn't bring a normal razor because I don't even *own* one, I never use them." He took in a sharp breath, as though

exhausted by all the words that had poured out of him. “The battery ran out *while* I was shaving as well, *look*.”

George turned his head to the side, revealing the right side of his face and for the first time, Clay noticed the large patch of clear skin at the top of his jaw. He stifled a grin.

“This is what I get for packing in a hurry, I guess.” George seemed glum as he looked down at the useless shaver, held limply in his hands.

“You can use mine if you want,” The suggestion burst out of Clay, coloured with eagerness. “My razor, that is. I don’t mind sharing until we can get a socket convertor or something.”

George scrunched his nose, looking dubiously over at Clay. “You sure?”

“I’m sure,” Clay smiled warmly at him. “I can’t let my boyfriend go around with a half-shaven beard, now, can I?”

For a moment, Clay was worried he’d said the wrong thing, but then, George’s mouth curled into a matching smile. “It’s barely a beard,” He giggled, running his hand over the dusting of hair, a little self consciously. “Thank you, though.”

Clay crouched down, his knees protesting against the hard floor as he rifled around in the cupboard for his razor. “I can change the blade if you want me to.”

“No, it’s okay,” A peachy blush was rising under George’s skin, battling with the hair for space on his face. “Thank you, Clay. I really appreciate this.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I don’t mind.”

It was nice to offer something like this to George, another small step in this long, arduous apology, and Clay felt something warm make itself at home in his gut as he straightened up, getting to his feet again. He placed both the razor and his travel-sized shaving gel next to the sink and then turned to head out of the bathroom, but before he’d even taken a step, George stopped him, his fingers wrapping around Clay’s wrist.

“What?” Clay asked, pausing in the doorway.

“How do you...?” George gestured wordlessly to the razor on the counter.

“*What?*”

George sighed. “I’ve only ever used electric. I don’t know how to...” He trailed off again, his hand rising once again to absentmindedly rub at his stubble.

“*You don’t?*”

George looked away, the flush on his cheeks rising from peach to pink. “It’s fine, I’ll figure it out. Don’t worry.”

“No, George, don’t worry, I don’t mind helping you.” The words came out in a rush, almost pleading and George’s eyes seemed larger than before as he stared at Clay.

“You don’t mind?”

“I *want* to help.” Clay’s mouth curved upwards, trying to coax another smile out of George. “It’s not difficult. I’ll teach you.”

He took a step back towards George, who was still gazing up at him with those wide eyes and turned on the tap, letting the cool water sluice over his hands.

“Well, uh, you’d usually clean your face before you start, but you just showered so you’ll be fine.”

“I know that bit,” George murmured.

Clay nodded as dried his hand on one of the plush towels. “Do you use shaving gel or cream with an electric razor?”

“No, you can just shave dry,” George seemed more relaxed now, as though accepting Clay was genuinely going to help him. “That’s part of the appeal I suppose, it’s a lot quicker and easier, though a manual razor gets a cleaner shave.”

The hiss of the aerosol seemed loud in the quiet bathroom as Clay squeezed a dollop of shaving gel onto his hand. The sharp noise contrasted with the steady drip of the shower and hum of the fan, and the stilted backdrop of sound did nothing to quell the awkwardness Clay felt. He let his voice lower as he began to work the gel in the palm of his hand, speaking conversationally to George as he moved.

“You’ve got to really work it to build it up into a lather, see?” He tilted his hands towards George, who tracked the motion of his fingers with watchful eyes. “There’s kind of a knack to it because if you stop too early, it gets this weird consistency and you can’t use it. You need to build up a real foam, or you could nick your skin.” All too late Clay realised that the mess of shaving gel was all over *his* hands, not George’s and he slowed, his fingers only shifting the thick foam he’d created. “Do you wanna try it yourself, or...?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Uhm, well then you just need to sort of smear it over all the areas you need to shave, you can’t leave anything dry if you’re going to run a razor over it.”

“Well, my face and neck then, anywhere there’s hair.” A smile played on George’s lips and for a second, Clay thought he saw the spark of a challenge in those dark eyes. But after a moment, it was gone, and he was half sure he’d imagined it as George stepped towards him, tilting his face up. “I mean, it’s pretty obvious where I need to shave.”

“I’m just trying to provide a comprehensive lesson here,” Clay muttered. “Do you mind if I just...” His hand drifted upwards, the mess of foam cool against his skin.

“Go ahead,” George leant in and Clay, for the first time, noticed the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose, only visible under the bright lights of the bathroom. For a stark moment, Clay was reminded of the last time George had been this close. When he’d been yelling at him, tears in his eyes. But there were no tears in George’s eyes now, just an expanse of warm deep umber, that became half-hidden by pale lids when Clay touched his hand to George’s cheek.

“It tingles,” George laughed, a light lilting sound that lured a matching chuckle out of Clay.

“I know,” Clay’s hand drifted down to George’s neck, feeling the echo of a pulse under his fingertips, and when he next spoke, the words caught in his throat. “It’s meant to feel refreshing.”

“It just feels messy,” George’s voice was even lower than Clay’s.

It *did* feel messy. It was nothing like applying the foam to his own face, which Clay did without even thinking, his hand rubbing over his skin with brisk movements. George’s face felt somehow fragile under the pads of his fingers, the fine bones obstacles, the thinner skin around his mouth and under his jaw, a trap, an opportunity to inflict pain. So Clay went slowly, his fingers moving in deliberate circles as he raised his hand up to George’s face, then back down to the lather in his hand. Then up. Then down.

He became lost in the rhythm, until, at last, his palm was empty and all of George’s stubble had been coated in the foam. Without entirely meaning to, Clay had brought both of his hands up to George’s face, his fingers stroking over the skin to ensure every patch was covered. He suddenly realised he was cupping George’s face in his hands and now it was Clay’s turn to blush as he turned away, rinsing his hands clean at the sink, avoiding the threat of eye contact.

“You’ve gotta let it sit for a bit,” His hands found the towel again, fingers digging into the fleecy fabric. “It softens the hair, which is why you’ve got to rub it in.” Clay rinsed the razor under the tap as well, watching in the mirror as George raised a hand to the foam on his cheeks. He looked oddly endearing, his face flooded with curiosity. “It’s honestly mad to me you’ve never done this before,” Clay said with a chuckle.

Their eyes met in the mirror and George smiled, dropping his hand down. “I’ve never needed to. I didn’t have to shave for ages, and then when I started, I just used electric. It’s convenient.”

“It’s convenient until it runs out of battery.” Clay shook the razor dry, then turned to George, handing it to him. “And like you said, a traditional razor gets a cleaner shave.”

George eyed it warily. “I’m not particularly fussed about the length of the hair.”

“Understandable.” Clay smiled gently at him. “The blade’s made to cut, remember, so you don’t have to put any effort in, just let it glide over your skin. With this one, my razor, you don’t even have to worry about the curves of your face or anything, it does all the work.” George’s thumb was running back and forth over the handle, tracing a nervous pattern. “I promise it won’t cut you, it’s called a safety razor for a reason. You’ve just got to shave with the grain of your hair, down on the face, up on the neck.”

George raised the razor to his face, letting it hover above his cheek. “I know that bit too. I know how hair works.”

“Comprehensive lesson, remember.”

George looked as though he was holding back a smile as he moved, dragging the razor over the skin of his cheek. The blade came away coated with a layer of foam yet it seemed as though it’d picked up barely any hair.

“You've got to press harder.”

George nodded, his expression one of focus and the next time he dragged the razor down, it collected a little hair along with it.

“Good,” Clay murmured, “Just remember, it’s not going to cut you. Make sure you rinse the blade frequently as well, see, the foam’s already building up.”

As George leant towards the sink to wash the blade, he examined the side of his face in the mirror, letting out a hiss of frustration at the mass of hair, still visible on his skin. “You said it was easy.”

“It’s meant to be.”

“Can’t you just show me, at least a couple of times?” George’s face was beseeching. “I don’t know how hard to press.”

“Sure,” Clay said, holding out his hand for the razor. He *couldn't* say no, not with George looking at him like that.

If running his fingers over George’s skin felt dangerous, the blade felt infinitely worse. Clay’s hand rose reflexively to steady George’s face, his finger’s settling in a span across his neck, with the index finger pushing on the jaw, tilting George’s cheek towards him. When Clay first ran the blade over the cheek, he pressed too lightly, just as George had done. He rectified this on the second pass, feeling the unsteady thudding of George’s pulse with the pads of his fingers. George himself was remaining resolutely still, staring forward, his jaw set. The fresh smell of the shaving foam invaded Clay’s senses as he leant inwards and the third drag of the razor was almost perfect, leaving a swathe of unblemished skin in its wake.

“See, you’ve got to be firm,” The shaving foam was collecting on Clay’s skin as his hold on George’s neck shifted. “Have you got it?”

“I think so.”

Clay leant back, stepping away from George and, after rinsing it, offered him the razor. When George took it, his hand was steady, but Clay noticed a smattering of goosebumps across his pale arms.

It finally seemed as though George had gotten the hang of shaving. He had almost no rhythm to his motions and appeared nervous every time he touched the blade to his skin, but he was cutting most of the hair, gradually growing in confidence.

“If we can't get an adapter for your weird plug, we can just get you your own razor,” Clay said, as he watched George work.

“That wouldn’t be so bad,” George murmured, his eyes still fixed to the mirror in front of him.

“I’m not *terrible* at this.”

“You’re improving.”

“What can I say,” George’s eyes flicked away from his reflection to look at Clay. “I’ve got a great teacher.”

Clay didn’t know why the words provoked a blush, but he could do little to stop the warmth from collecting in his cheeks. He stuttered a half-sarcastic thanks that came out far too genuine and turned away from George, suddenly fascinated by the towel.

“Leo said something about going shopping tomorrow,” George’s voice was monotone as he became engrossed once more in the process of shaving. “He offered us a ride, which I thought was nice.”

“Oh, you met Leo.”

“Yeh, I ran into him yesterday.” George ran the razor under the faucet before tapping it briskly on the side of the sink to shake the water off. “We should rescue him from Hannah, he’s too sweet for her.”

A laugh snuck out of Clay before he could stop it. “If Hannah continues behaving like Hannah, he’ll leave on his own, without our help.”

“I wish him the best of luck with that.”

The pair appraised each other and Clay had to hold back a smile. Their voices had held a matching bitterness and in some small petty way, Clay revelled in the clear disdain George had for Hannah. It felt like support. It felt like vindication.

George, at long last, had managed to clear the shaving foam from both his face and neck, and he bent over the sink to rinse his face clean. His movements were far rougher than anything Clay had dared to impose and after he’d finished, he leant towards the mirror, assessing.

“There’s still *so much* hair left.” George sounded dismayed.

“Don’t worry, it happens. I usually do a second pass of the razor regardless.” When George turned towards him, Clay could see the untidy scraps of hair that still littered George’s face. “It still looks way better than before.”

“Thanks,” George sounded glum as he continued examining his reflection. “I don’t know how you do this all the time, it’s exhausting.”

“It’s a bit fiddly, yeh, but it’s just practice.”

“I might just leave it like this, I can’t be bothered to go through all that again.”

“I can do the second pass for you,” The offer had leapt out of Clay’s mouth without his approval and he was starting to realise his inability to see George in any sort of distress was going to complicate things.

“You can?”

The small smile George gave him made any potential awkwardness worthwhile, and Clay nodded.

This time, George was the one who worked the shaving gel up into a foam, on Clay's insistence that he had to learn somehow. Once George had daubed it onto his face, with the same smattering of complaints as before, Clay picked up the razor. He held it as though it were all blade, no handle; something sharp and tricky to balance against his fingers, ready to hurt him. The plastic was still a little warm from when George was gripping it earlier and there was a dampness that clung to it, either from rinsing it so frequently or from a sheen of sweat. Whichever it was, it seemed to make holding onto the razor far more difficult.

There truly seemed no way to clear the hair from George's face without getting *offensively* close. Their difference in height seemed all the more striking as Clay stepped nearer, his left hand once more drifting up to steady George's neck, while his right clasped the razor. It seemed apt that this part of the apology served to rewrite the memory of the last time they were this close and as Clay worked, cleaning the excess hair from George's face, he thought about *that time*. About that fight. Now George was here, warm under the palm of his hand, so close and yielding, their argument felt almost like something to be grateful for. At least they both *knew* now. At least there was no threat that the dam would break and they'd rush into something they couldn't move past. They were moving past it right now, they were making amends, amends that smelt like shaving cream and felt like soft skin under the pads of his fingertips. At least being that close and letting their voices raise in the way they had wasn't some dormant fear. They knew a little more of the worst parts of the other, and while at first that had seemed like a terrifying mistake, the thought now prospered something akin to relief.

It had been a blessing to drift away, to disconnect and introspect, but now Clay had chased his train of thought to its completion and he found himself firmly back in reality, George still pliant under his hands. The right side of George's face was clear at last, so with an awkward shuffle, Clay made his way around to the left. Silence was more bearable to work in, but Clay found himself needing to speak as he let the blade run along the line of George's jaw. He'd been quiet for too long and it was beginning to suffocate him.

"I don't know if you noticed but my razor has blades on both sides," The sentence was somewhat muddled as Clay cleared his throat, and his words felt as sharp as the slices of metal in his hand.

"I didn't notice, no." George's voice was gentle and Clay felt the rumble of the words under the skin of his neck.

"See," Clay brought the razor in front of George's eyeline, his thumb tracing the back. "It has a single blade here for details, like the edge of your sideburns or the skin above your lip." Clay deliberately hadn't touched that area, below George's nose and on his chin. That would take more bravery than he had right now.

"Thank you." George kept his mouth half-closed as he spoke, evidently cautious of the blade that had returned to his neck. "Thank you for taking so much effort, for telling me about this stuff. I appreciate it."

"It's for my benefit too. I don't want to have to shave your face for the whole of the trip."

"Hey, I've been good!" Clay's hand shifted on George's neck as the razor stilled. George's head tilted up, very suddenly, his eyes finding Clay's. "I mean, I've been staying still. Making it easy."

Clay could feel heat building on George's skin. "You have."

George had returned his gaze to the mirror, quiet as his eyes traced over the curve of Clay's smile. Clay copied the motion, studying the pair of them as they stood, reflected.

It was only once he'd looked into the mirror that Clay noticed George was leaning into him; in a way so subtle it was hard to discern. He inhaled, a little unsteady, and the air serrated his throat as his hungry eyes raked across their reflections. Clay had never spent much time studying himself in the mirror, yet with George by his side, the sight became strangely addictive. He was sure it was a side effect of spending too much time apart, talking to screens and reconciling with the fact they didn't belong in photos together, yet their reflections hooked him in a way he'd never felt with Nick. George seemed to *compliment* him, his short and slender frame an appealing contrast, making Clay's shoulders seem broader, his skin tanner. George's dark hair had dried a little, fading back to brown and the hazy edges framed Clay's awkward jawline, made the harsh line softer, more pleasant and for a moment Clay was seized with the urge to wrap his arm around George's chest, just to see how they'd look pressed up against each other. The need was almost overwhelming until Clay's eyes latched onto George's face. The guarded expression his friend wore anchored Clay, reminded him of who they were and why they were here and all of a sudden it was just *too much*.

"Are you alright doing the rest yourself?" Clay's voice was rough, peppered with a wild edge that turned every syllable he spoke into something far too honest. "There's only that bit above your lip left and I don't want to hurt you."

"That's fine." George's breath wreathed across Clay's neck and it was anything *but* fine. They leant away from each other and at long last, Clay drew in air that didn't feel like smoke in his lungs. Something vanished that had been growing between them, akin to when the iridescent skin of a bubble parts with a lazy *pop* and Clay almost regretted his step back as George raised the razor again.

Yes, the fight had been good. It had released that threat, hanging between them, and Clay knew, in the long run, it'd be beneficial, they'd learn and grow. Except he would do anything to go back to before that fight, before it all. Back when George was just a face on his screen, a collection of pixels, not something, *someone* warm and real. He'd do anything to go back to that simpler time, anything to release himself from the sense of nervousness George seemed to provoke now. Clay felt as though he was standing in a space far too small for his large frame, balancing on something fragile that was buckling under his weight. Since when had George compromised his ability to *breathe*?

At long last, George's face was clear. He smiled up at Clay, his cheeks creasing away from the curve of his mouth. Clay smiled with him, his hand reaching out to slip under George's chin brushing over the hairless skin. He watched the motion as though he was a bystander in his own body, incapable of snatching his hand away. George's face was smooth, cool from the water that had been splashed over his skin.

"D'you want aftershave?" Clay was almost surprised he'd been *able* to speak, he was so starved of air. His hand dropped back to his side.

“You use aftershave?”

“My mom buys it for me. It’s good for hydration.”

George giggled slightly, his hands twisting around the towel he held. “Sure, I’ll have some.”

Clay had to rummage around under the sink again to find his aftershave, and when he straightened back up, the echo of a laugh was still alive in George’s eyes. George held out his hand and Clay cradled the back of it, keeping the outstretched palm still as he squeezed out a generous dollop of aftershave. It was the gel kind, slightly tacky, and George scrunched up his nose as he rubbed it between his fingers.

“It smells like you.” George leant towards the mirror, peering at his reflection, his hands smoothing over his chin, his neck.

“How shocking.”

A scowl twisted itself across George’s mouth. “You’re so mean, Clay.”

“No I’m not.” The sound of his name made Clay nervous. “I’m nice, I helped you shave.”

“You’re *meant* to be nice.”

“Why am I meant to be nice, George?”

“You said you would be.” George had finished rubbing the aftershave in, and now he turned around, making direct eye contact.

“When?”

“You said you’d make it up to me.”

Clay *couldn't* look away. “Maybe I’ve already made it up to you and now I get to be mean again.”

“That’s not how it works.” George turned around to hang the towel up, his hands smoothing the fabric so it laid flat from the hook. “You’re never allowed to be mean to me again.”

“And why’s that.”

“Because you’re my boyfriend, Clay.” George looked in the mirror again, his reflection studying Clay, eyes narrowed and mouth curved in a complacent smirk.

Chapter End Notes

OOooof 9k words later (that's both chpts combined, luvs) and I hope y'all enjoyed. This content was written over an embarrassingly large period of time so I'm glad I was able to keep going and put it out- and I hope the other shhiz I've already written and plan to write sees the light of day as well

Literally so much love and thanks to glittering ant ([Twitter](#), [AO3](#)). They're a fucking angel who not only fed me perpetual encouragement but read thru my work and formatted these two chpts for me so I FINALLY HAVE PROPER PARAGRAPH

SPACING. Ily boo (also thanks for hyping up my poor fans on twt more than I ever did, baby works hard <3)

In regards to the future, I have big plans!! I have timelines and fluff snippets and mountain hikes and nighttime cuddles and all the perfect fic bullshit I've wanted to write since day one. I, however, unfortunately, have a degree I need to get and a general ton of academic bullshit and LIFE to deal with. I'm also shit at time management.

Baso, imma TRY to write this shit. I think a chapter a month is a good schedule to keep (chpts of reasonable length, cos wtf was I one with those 10k chapters, tf???). I'll still take breaks and fuck off occasionally but I'll keep y'all posted on twt:

[@LolaLikes](#)

WhiHC I PROMISE I WILL ACTUALLY USE- I'M SORRY, I'LL DO BETTER (on the real tho, ik I joke but y'all have been so patient and never hassled me and I appreciate that a fuckton <333)

anyways. It's good to be back and I'm so grateful for y'all. See u next time.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!